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# Liminality & the Fantastic: Snakes in Ancient Athenian Visual and Material Culture from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Periods

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# Liminality & the Fantastic

| Snakes in Ancient Athenian Visual and  
Material Culture from the Archaic to the  
Hellenistic Periods



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Classics Departmental Honors Thesis  
University of Colorado Boulder

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## ABSTRACT

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The snake is a practically omnipresent figure in Athenian visual culture from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods and has been commonly understood in relation to the earth, autochthony, death, and domestic settings. However, primary literary sources, secondary scholarship, and Athenian visual culture—including vase painting, sculpture, and architectural embellishments—illustrate the serpent’s complex, often liminal role in Athenian culture. Using as models Walter Burkert’s insights on the uncanny, Victor Turner’s theory of liminality, and Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantastic, this thesis will explore how the serpent’s occupation of multiple interstices created its symbolic meaning. Through careful attention to these sources it will become clear that the snake does not conform to categorization, but instead exists in the tension between modes of classification. The snake’s symbolic representation of boundaries between critical modes of reality, such as mortality and immortality, complicates our understanding of its identity and purpose. I will suggest that the serpent’s omnipresence in Athenian visual and material culture symbolizes a *fantastic* lack of control.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Abbreviations

Acr.	Athens, Acropolis Museum
<i>ARFVAP</i>	J. Boardman, <i>Athenian Red Figure Vases: the Archaic Period</i> , London 1975
<i>ARFVCP</i>	J. Boardman, <i>Athenian Red Figure Vases: the Classical Period</i> , New York 1989
<i>ARV</i>	J. D. Beazley, <i>Attic Red Figure Vase-painters</i> , 1963
BM	London, British Museum
<i>CVA</i>	<i>Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum</i>
<i>GSCP</i>	J. Boardman, <i>Greek Sculpture: the Classical Period</i> , New York 1985
<i>GSHC</i>	J. Boardman, <i>Greek Sculpture: the High Classical Period</i> , New York 1985
<i>GSLCP</i>	J. Boardman, <i>Greek Sculpture: the Late Classical Period</i> , New York 1995
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i>
MET	New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
NM	Athens, National Museum
<i>RFVA</i>	A.D. Trendall and A. Cambitoglou, <i>The Red Figure Vases of Apulia</i> , Oxford 1978

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A narrow fellow in the grass  
Occasionally rides;  
You may have met him, — did you not,  
His notice sudden is.  
The grass divides as with a comb,  
A spotted shaft is seen;  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on.  
He likes a boggy acre,  
A floor too cool for corn.  
Yet when a child, and barefoot,  
I more than once, at morn,  
Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash  
Unbraiding in the sun, —  
When, stooping to secure it,  
It wrinkled, and was gone.  
Several of nature's people  
I know, and they know me;  
I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality;  
But never met this fellow,  
Attended or alone,  
Without a tighter breathing,  
And zero at the bone.

- *Emily Dickinson*

Post-Bronze Age Athenian ophidian iconography is often associated with death, earthly matters, and domestic cult, and the serpent itself is generally thought of as an autochthonous figure in ancient Athenian culture. In his masterpiece *Greek Religion*, Walter Burkert discusses the regenerative effect of the serpent: “It is a general belief among the Greeks that the deceased may appear in the form of a snake; semi-rational speculation claimed that the spinal cord of the corpse is transformed into a snake.”<sup>1</sup> This eerie depiction of the snake as a haunted vessel of rebirth only partially illuminates its grand effect: “The most unsettling of creatures for man is the snake: uncanny in shape and behavior, it will appear without warning, perhaps to lick libation leftovers, then will vanish as swiftly as it came.”<sup>2</sup>

The serpent is the slimy, slithering, fleeting creature that disappears just as we reach to “secure it.”<sup>3</sup> It is the recurring emblem of a situation that cannot be grasped, of a state of being that cannot be classified. Once you think you have managed an understanding of it, the serpent *wrinkles and is gone*.<sup>4</sup> It slithers across boundaries that separate domains, identities, and realities; it is reborn at every shedding of old skin. In its complexity of meaning and its fluidity of movement, the snake transcends culturally defined classifications. It is the marginal being that appears at in-betweens, that straddles the confines of zones crucial to the division of society. Quick to appear and even faster to disappear, the serpent occupies the very moment of transition. It is the figuration of

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<sup>1</sup> Burkert 195.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dickinson, “The Snake.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

ambiguity and the very translation of an unknowingness that reveals a *fantastic* lack of control.

In his renowned anthropological work *Process, Performance, and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology*, Victor Turner discusses the notion of liminality and liminal spaces within communities. Derived from the term “liminal,” (Latin *limen*, *liminis*; meaning a threshold),<sup>5</sup> liminality was first used in the context of psychology to describe a transitional space in a rite of passage that marks a period of “ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though sometimes these are most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or the subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states.”<sup>6</sup> The *limen* cannot be defined and categorized; it is a marginal space characterized by its transitional or intermediate status between two states, two situations, etc.<sup>7</sup> Turner further suggests that ritual symbols belonging to the liminal phase often fall into two categories, phases of effacement and phases of ambiguity or paradox.<sup>8</sup> During these moments of ambiguity, specifically, identity becomes suspended as we float between two modes of reality.<sup>9</sup>

For structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, this liminal period of floating, during which the subject is at a standstill between two differing modes of reality, is the “very heart of the fantastic.”<sup>10</sup> I will come back to this point and to Todorov’s theory during the conclusion. Thus, there are three primary theories that will frame this thesis: Burkert’s theory of snakes as the most uncanny of all animals; Turner’s theory of liminality as

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<sup>5</sup> “Liminal.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Turner 16.

<sup>7</sup> “Liminal.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 7 Dec. 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Turner 18.

<sup>9</sup> Carson xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Todorov 25.

existence at a threshold; and lastly, Todorov's theory of the fantastic as a hesitation between two modes of reality. This thesis considers the serpent in light of these three theories, incorporating literature, visual culture, and archaeological evidence from the years 600 to 27 BCE (chronology is discussed further below). Taking these three theories, I will contextualize my argument via J.J. Pollitt's profound notion that "the visual arts in ancient Greece were vehicles of *expression*."<sup>11</sup>

The Classical period (480-323 BCE) is the *limen* between the Archaic (600-480 BCE) and the Hellenistic periods (323-27 BCE). Pollitt contends that Archaic art "on the whole chose to transcend the overt expression of emotion and changing states of mind and to rely on purely formal qualities of design to express the orderly world which it envisioned," and that "one of the distinguishing features of the art of the Classical period was that it broke away from this emotional impassivity in Archaic art."<sup>12</sup> The Classical period broke impassivity, but it does not yet exemplify the surge of emotionality that we get from the art of the Hellenistic period. The Classical period exists between these two, between 'impassivity' and emotional depth. I want to note here that I will refer to the Classical period as the "explosion" of Athenian creative production. This is not to be taken as the same as the reference to the Hellenistic period as "explosive." In the Classical period, "explosion" refers to abundance, whereas Hellenistic art shows an "explosive" variety of techniques and an unprecedented extent of emotionality.

I have divided this thesis into three major categories: I. Understanding Autochthony, II. The Extension of Man or Man and his Fate, and III. Anxiety. Section I will consider the extent of Athens' relationship to the serpent. Section I will grapple with

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<sup>11</sup> Pollitt, xiii. Pollitt's argument in *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* is somewhat simplistic, outdated, and controversial, but makes an interesting springing point for the discussion of snakes.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 6-9.

the issue of foreign versus indigenous — and, more specifically, how the snake was used as a symbol of autochthony. This chapter will focus on politics in Archaic and Classical Athens as represented in vase painting, freestanding sculpture, architectural sculpture, and text. We will find that the snake's liminality stems from its identity as a part of the ground as well as its identity as having come from the ground.

Next we will move into Section II, which will explore the relationship between men and gods. Chapter 1 will discuss the afterlife. This chapter focuses primarily on hero-gods and their relationship to the serpent. The serpent will be treated both as a guise and (mostly) as an attribute suggestive of the hero's own liminality. Grounded in scholarly thought, a survey of literature, contemporary thought and practice, and material production will show a relationship between two liminal creatures, a relationship which exists foremost in liminal zones and during journeys of liminal character.

Chapter 2 of Section II will explore the serpent's cyclical relationship to life and death as a crucial element of its liminality, as evidenced in material culture, ritual and religious practices, literature, and secondary sources. Most literature on the subject comes from the Classical period, during Athens' apogee, and has been collected from a comprehensive search of Greek texts using the Perseus Digital Library.<sup>13</sup> The parameters of this search limited the yield to texts written between 600 and 27 BCE that contained any of the following terms in their translation(s): "snake," "snakes," "serpent," "serpents," "dragon," and "dragons." The terms of this search include "dragon" and "dragons" as well as "snake(s)" and "serpent(s)" because the ancient Greek term δράκω means both "snake" and "dragon." We will review this textual evidence alongside Archaic and Hellenistic artistic representations of snakes in an attempt to ground the two

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<sup>13</sup> All literary sources used in this text can be found in their original Greek in Appendix B.



in modern scholarly thought on liminal spaces between life and death. In its entirety, Chapter 2 will unveil the serpent's existence in these liminal spaces and reveal the tension between the realms of life and death.

Finally we will move on to Section III, which will examine instances of anxiety in relation to the previous two sections. Section III will also introduce additional ways in which the serpent translates Athenian anxiety. Chapter 3 will briefly demonstrate how ophidian attributes provided Olympian deities with the transformational power to transcend heavenly, earthly, and underworld zones. Drawing on sculpture and secondary sources, we will find that the Olympian gods become liminal with their adoption of serpentine attributes. The serpent brings unknown, or chthonic associations into known (Olympian) realms and clouds their dividing lines.

Chapter 4 will survey text, art, and myth to elucidate the common choice of serpent to denote shape-shifters. Within this chapter we will find two liminal forms in which the serpent participates. First, one form will exhibit two shapes: serpent and human. Second, a single form with the ability to take on another form (he or she embodies *one* of these forms at a time) will often move between human and snake. We will build an understanding of why the serpent was so often the chosen embodied form and how this choice informs the serpent's identity as liminal.

In Chapter 5 of Section III we will investigate the serpent's character as an admixture of good and evil tendencies. Mythology, literature, material remains, and modern scholarship will shed light on the serpent's power as a provider of dualistic personalities. This chapter will focus on the serpent as a signal of a being's internal versus external liminality. From here, we will reach our conclusion.

The serpent is the recurring emblem of a situation that cannot be grasped, of a state of being that cannot be classified. The serpent slithers over the bounds that confine and divide all other facets of society. It is for this reason that one has “never met this fellow, / Attended or alone, / Without a tighter breathing, / And zero at the bone.”<sup>14</sup>

*A note on the chronological and geographical limits of this thesis:*

The chronological limits of this thesis are 600 and 27 BCE. These years encompass the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods of Greek antiquity. These periods not only witnessed the florescence of Greek culture, but they also display the largest and most variant body of Greek art. Further, these periods document the rise of Athens to her apex and her subsequent fall to Macedonia. Although these periods mark the chronological limitations of this paper, other chronological limits affect some of the evidence presented in this paper and should be noted. First, by around 300 BCE the painting of figures and scenes on pottery had ceased almost entirely. Thus the vases included in this paper do not post-date 300 BCE. Additionally, a Perseus text search proved that any texts produced after 336 BCE did not feature serpents, so the textual evidence included in this paper does not go later than this date.

Second, although the body of evidence presented in this paper is predominantly Athenian, there exist a few exceptions. First, sculptures mentioned in this essay include Roman copies. The Romans much admired Greek art and often commissioned copies of statues that they saw in Greece or after their removal to Rome. Occasionally Romans even hired Greek sculptors to carry out these jobs. There is much debate surrounding Roman alterations and why they were made, but most agree that a Roman copy provides

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<sup>14</sup> Dickinson, “The Snake.”

at least a notion for how the Greek prototype would have looked. Regardless, the subject matter of the statue remains the same even if its context or positioning undergoes slight alterations. Additionally, copies are useful in that many of these Greek prototypes no longer exist. The copies thus serve as the *only* evidence of the statue. The second exception to the Atheno-centric rule has to do with vases. Around 430 BCE, the center of vase production moved from Athens to Apulia, in Southern Italy. For this reason, Apulian vase painting has been considered in the body of research presented in this paper. The same stance has been taken on Macedonia. During the Hellenistic period, after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the center of Greek life and production moved from Athens to Macedon.

## SECTION I

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### Understanding Autochthony

First it is important to note the fundamental Athenian relationship to the snake. Athenians conceived of snakes as autochthonous, as animals linked to what emerges from the earth as well as what is placed within the earth.<sup>15</sup> In accordance to this belief, we can see the inherently liminal feature of serpents: they are both the earth itself and *of* the earth. Through this liminal positioning Athenians used the autochthonic associations of the serpent to emphasize extreme nativity to Athenian soil. Myth demonstrates this liminality, telling the stories of snakes (and men) who were born spontaneously from the earth. Characters who are both the ground and *of* the ground demonstrate geographical and cultural indigenesness. For instance, material culture from the Classical period incorporates snakes in a liminal realm that parallels their liminal status: caves. Caves are often considered liminal spaces for the same reason that the autochthonic figures are liminal—because of their dual existence above and within the ground. Additionally, liminal beings and liminal experiences are often associated with caves.<sup>16</sup>

In what follows I will provide examples of autochthony in literature and visual culture from the Archaic and Classical periods. First I will draw on visual culture surrounding Athena and then Erichthonios, and provide literary evidence suggesting the autochthonous nature of Cecrops. Finally, I will discuss the so-called Bluebeard Pediment from the Archaic Acropolis and the autochthony in its political implications.

## 1 | *Athena*

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<sup>15</sup> “Snakes.” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

<sup>16</sup> See Herodotus, *Histories* (440 BCE) and Euripides, *Phoenissae* (411 BCE).



During his rule (461-429 BCE), and specifically following the defeat of the Persians in 449 BCE marked by the Peace of Kallias, Perikles aimed at one thing: the utmost glorification of Athens. Perikles achieved this primarily through his building program on the Athenian Acropolis, which began in 447 BCE. As part of this project, Perikles commissioned Phidias to sculpt a forty-foot-tall chryselephantine<sup>17</sup> statue of Athena Parthenos. This sculpture was the epitome of the Athenian golden age. It displayed everything Perikles wished to relay about Athens: power, riches, and an ancestry rooted in wisdom and rationality. The last of these desires pushed Perikles to emphasize Athens' relationship to Athena, the goddess of Wisdom. According to Perikles, Athena was not just the patron deity of Athens; she *was* Athens.<sup>18</sup>

A reproduction of the Athena Parthenos in the Royal Ontario Museum showcases the utter extravagance of the statue that would have stood at the center of Athens (fig. 1). In this reconstruction we can also see one of the goddess' attributes, the snake. The serpent marks Athena as inherently autochthonous.<sup>19</sup> Athena's serpent links the goddess to Athens through its autochthonous connotation. It is what elevates Athens to a divinely sanctioned *polis* with a divine heritage.

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<sup>17</sup> Sculpted of ivory and containing gold, silver, and precious gems.

<sup>18</sup> Diamant, "The Acropolis." 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Some scholars suggest that Athena's snake is her chthonic animal. This theory will be discussed in Chapter 3.



**Fig. 1. Modern Reconstruction of the Athena Parthenos by Phidias. Original dedicated in 437 BCE.<sup>20</sup>**

The inside of the shield on the Athena Parthenos shows the goddess fighting in a typical Classical battle scene: the gigantomachy. The gigantomachy, or the battle against the Giants,<sup>21</sup> exemplifies Perikles' ambition in differentiating Athens from other *poleis*. Post-Persian Wars Athenian art uses metaphor to reflect the defeat of rational civilization (Athens) over the irrational barbarian (in this case, the Giants).<sup>22</sup> During these scenes Athena is often pictured in her snaky aegis. The external painting of a Classical volute krater shows Athena engaged in the Gigantomachy (fig. 2). A Gorgoneion sits at the center of her snaky aegis.

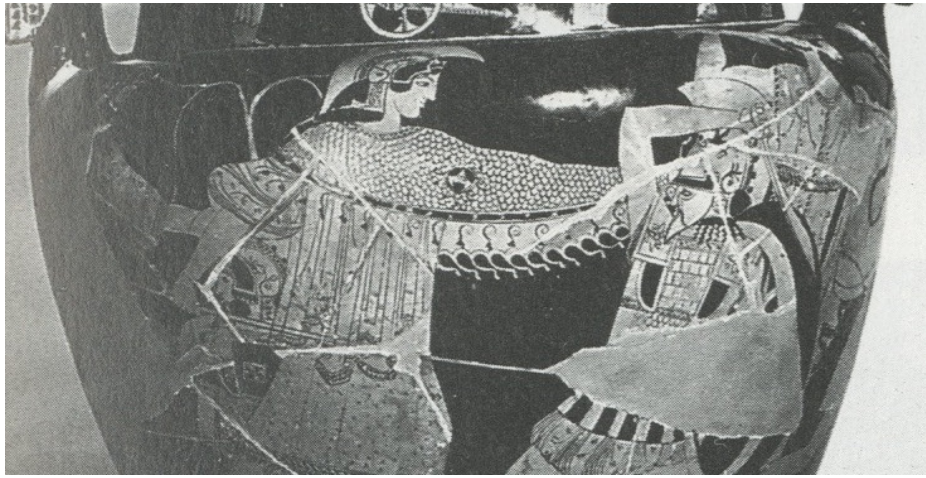
Although the snakes on Athena's aegis are often considered a hangover from the Gorgoneion often at the center of the aegis, vase painting and sculpture illustrate

<sup>20</sup> Photo: Public Domain.

<sup>21</sup> The Giants were a race of large, aggressive, monstrous men who were often depicted in a battle against the Olympian gods.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Giants see "Giants (Gigantes)" in the *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.

Athena's snaky aegis without the Gorgoneion (fig. 3). A statue of the goddess from The Old Athena Temple,<sup>23</sup> for instance, shows Athena wearing her snaky aegis (fig. 4). The aegis does not have a Gorgoneion on it, but the snakes remain. Athena grasps one of the snakes from the perimeter of the aegis and points it at her enemy, a Giant. The aegis will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5, but it is important to note that when she was fighting for Athens, Athena's vestments served a function that exceeded the apotropaic quality of the Gorgoneion. Athena's aegis declared her extreme nativity to Athens.



**Fig. 2. Athena, Gigantomachy. Volute krater by the Altamura Painter, 475-425 BCE.<sup>24</sup>**



**Fig. 3. Athena. Amphora in the style of the 'Berlin Amphora' painter, c. 525-475.<sup>25</sup>**

<sup>23</sup> c. 510, Acropolis.

<sup>24</sup> *ARFVCP*, fig. 10.

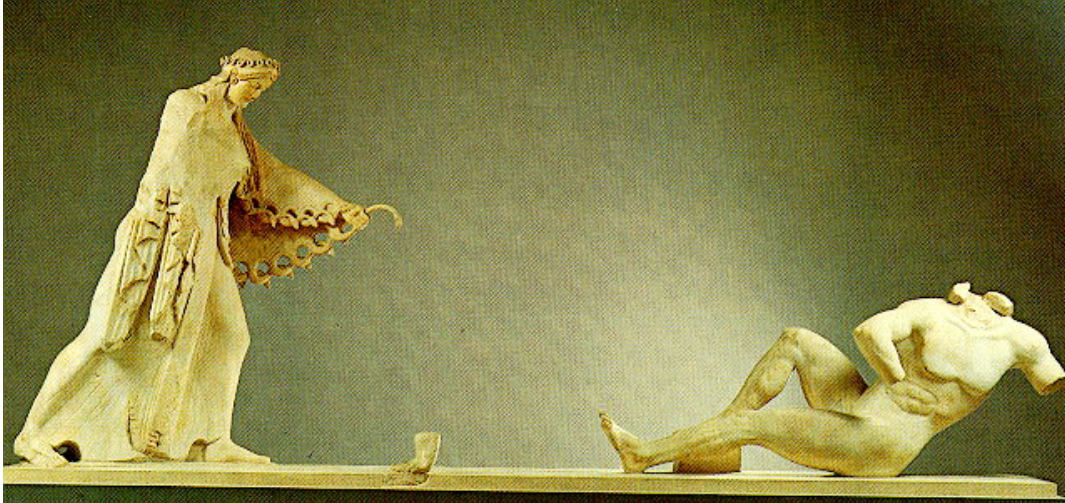


Fig. 4. Gigantomachy pediment from the Old Temple of Athena, c. 510 BCE.<sup>26</sup>

## 2 | *Erichthonios*

Athena's earth-born son, Erichthonios, epitomizes the liminal space between *chthon*, the earth, and *autochthon*, of the earth. Erichthonios is the hero-son of Athena and Hephaistos who was born out of the ground after Hephaistos' failed attempt to rape Athena. Hephaistos, fighting against Athena, only managed to ejaculate on her thigh. Athena subsequently wiped the semen off her leg with a towel and, dropping the towel, impregnated the earth. Thus is the story of Erichthonios' conception.<sup>27</sup>

Vases depict the hero's birth in one of two ways: either coming up from the earth directly or being handed to Athena by the personification of Earth, or *Mother Earth*, Gaia. An Attic Red-Figure pelike attributed to the Erichthonios painter depicts Erichthonios sitting atop a pile of rocks, waving at Athena (Fig. 5). Two erect, gaping

<sup>25</sup> *CVA*. London, British Museum 3. Pl. 10 2b.

<sup>26</sup> "Athens: Acropolis Museum: Pediment of the Ancient Temple."

<sup>27</sup> For more on the birth and infancy of Erichthonios, see "Erichthonios" in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*.



serpents stick their heads out from below Erichthonios' rock-throne. This vase shows Erichthonios, the autochthon; the hero and king who emerged from the ground. A cup by the Codrus Painter, however, shows a different rendition of Erichthonios' birth (Fig. 6). The painting on the outside of the cup shows Erichthonios as a small child being passed from Gaia to Athena, who is attended by Hephaistos.



**Fig. 5. Birth of Erichthonios. Red-figure pelike attributed to the Erichthonios Painter, 440-430 BCE.<sup>28</sup>**

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<sup>28</sup> *ARFVCP*, fig. 250.



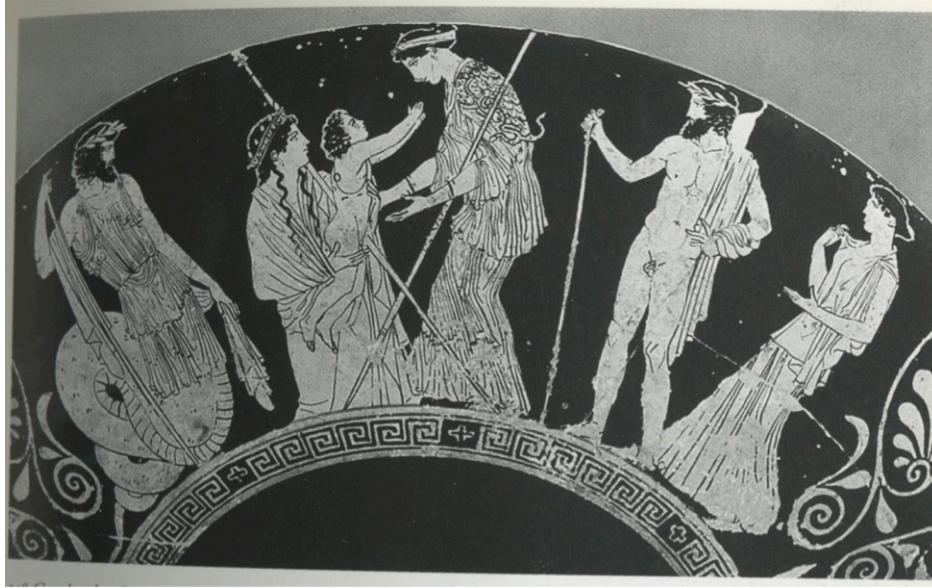


Fig. 6. The birth of Erichthonios. Cup attributed to the Codrus Painter, 440-420 BCE.<sup>29</sup>

### 3 | Cecrops

Cecrops also embodies the *limen* of the autochthon, being both the earth and of the earth. In his wide study of Greek ophidian iconography, *Deities and Heroes in the Form of Snakes*, Elpis Mitropoulou argues that Cecrops took on a snake tail in an Athenian attempt to present him as autochthonous.<sup>30</sup> Aristophanes' play *Wasps* (422 BCE) reflects this notion: "Oh, Cecrops, mighty hero with the tail of a dragon! Seest thou how these barbarians ill-use me — me, who have many a time made them weep a full bushel of tears?"<sup>31</sup>

Cecrops' autochthony was important to Athens because as an Athenian king, Cecrops instituted laws and conventions, divided Athenians into twelve communities, and

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, fig. 238. See also Richmond, Virginia Museum of the Arts 81.70.

<sup>30</sup> See Mitropoulou 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> Aristophanes, *Wasps*, lines 439-441. Trans. Eugene O'Neill, Jr.

taught them how to cultivate the olive. During his kingship, Cecrops also introduced marriage, the burial of the dead, and the invention of writing.<sup>32</sup> Thus emphasizing Cecrops' autochthony suggests that there was something inherently Athenian about Cecrops' important contributions to society.

#### 4 | *The Bluebeard Pediment*

A pediment from the Hekatompedon<sup>33</sup> displays the use of a snake tail to emphasize autochthony. The so-called Bluebeard pediment shows a single serpent with three human torsos (fig. 7). The men are almost identical, but each holds a different attribute, a representation of his group of political power. The man on the far right holds a dove, representative of the people beyond the mountains.<sup>34</sup> The man in the middle holds a sheath of wheat, symbolizing the wheat-growing people of the plains around Athens.<sup>35</sup> The man on the far left holds a wave, which suggests he represents the people by the sea.<sup>36</sup> This structure, which was erected under the rule of Peisistratos, was a political tool used by the ruler as a method of communicating his strategy to unite Athens under his rule. Thus the symbols of three different peoples are connected by one serpentine tail as a method of communicating their unity under Peisistratos, who belonged to the people

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<sup>32</sup> Mitropoulou 24.

<sup>33</sup> The Hekatompedon was the Archaic temple situated where the Parthenon now stands. The temple was built around 570-550 BC, prior to the "Old Parthenon." Hekatompedon means "100-feet long," although the temple seems to have been around 35 ft. short of this.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart, "6<sup>th</sup> c. Architectural Sculpture in the Akropolis Museum."

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. The Perseus Artifact Database contends that these men hold a bird, a stream of water, and a flame, respectively. The Database also mentions that who these men are remains a point of contention, but that different interpretations believe them to be Typhon, Tritopatreis, and Nereus, or Okeanos, Pontos, and Aither.

beyond the mountains when he assumed rule over Athens.<sup>37</sup> In drawing a physical unity for these three populations, the pediment represents Athenian autochthony. In fact, Peisistratos' greatest achievement was his creation of a union comprised of multiple communities under the title Attica.



**Fig. 7. Bluebeard pediment from the Hekatompedon, c. 570-550 BCE.<sup>38</sup>**

This chapter lays out information regarding the autochthonous nature of the serpent in order to suggest Athens' deep connection to the animal. So deep is this connection, that the serpent was often used to associate humans with Athens; thus it was the serpent that was the *original* Athenian. For the purpose of this thesis, we should revert to this understanding of the serpent. From here, the evolution of the serpent's many liminal associations will parallel those of the Athenian during the Classical period. As the animal that connected Athena to Athens during its apex, the embodiment that enables the liminality in some of Athens' earliest kings, and the physical manifestation of political unity, the serpent manifests the features that make Athenians *Athenians*. The significance of the choice to make this connection using a reptile with liminal connotation and that embodies liminality itself will become apparent and explained later in this thesis.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Photo: "Archaic Architecture and Architectural Sculpture."

## SECTION II

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### The Extension of Man / Man and his Fate

The dividing line between humanity and divinity blurs with the Athenian understanding of heroes. Heroes were humans who were deified upon their deaths. Upon apotheosis, heroes became superhuman entities to whom the Greeks sacrificed and prayed.<sup>39</sup> Thus the liminal space between mortality and immortality reflects a possibility of man reaching his gods. Anthropologist and scholar Timothy L. Carson explains this apotheosis as a rite of passage:

From the religio-symbolic perspective, all of the rites of passage are passages of death and rebirth leading participants into another form of existence. Time and space are thereby interpreted in light of sacred categories. Liminal existence is located in designated, separated sacred space, frequently representing connection to the earth and the divine.<sup>40</sup>

After the death of a hero, he is reborn into an alternate form of existence. The hero moves from an earthly to a divine existence:

Some extraordinary quality that makes the hero; something unpredictable and uncanny is left behind and is always present...A number of figures in cult and myth, who are invoked primarily as powerful helpers, reach with equal ease in to the heroic-chthonic domain and the domain of the gods, and it is this which gives them their special power: they penetrate below and above, near and far; they do not elude death.<sup>41</sup>

Heroes often underwent initiation practices, which are liminal in that they are the physical practices that define the space in between two realms. For instance, Herakles had to undergo a journey (Turner considers journeys to be liminal) during which he faced physical hardships that became the defining factors of his apotheosis. A bell krater by the

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<sup>39</sup> See Larson 196.

<sup>40</sup> Carson 10.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Pourtales Painter shows Herakles, the Dioskouroi, and Triptolemus as initiates at Eleusis (Fig. 8). The heroes sit beside two large, coiling snakes. These snakes would act as signals to the Greek spectator. The animals act as the ambiguous signal of the liminal space in which this scene takes place: “ambiguous symbols can be used in ritual...to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence...”<sup>42</sup> The snake as ambiguous symbol thus signals these levels of existence: “some deities evolved a cultic personality that blended Olympian and chthonian elements (the hero-gods Asklepios and Herakles are good examples).”<sup>43</sup> In what follows, I will explain the use of the serpent in the mythology and iconography of Herakles, Asklepios, Jason, Triptolemus, and a unique Athenian hero-cult that may be associated with Dionysos.



Fig. 8. Bell krater by the Pourtales Painter, c. 380-360 BCE.<sup>44</sup>

## 1 | *Herakles*

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<sup>42</sup> Douglas 41.

<sup>43</sup> Larson 12.

<sup>44</sup> *ARFVCP*, fig. 372.

The greatest of the Greek hero-deities is Herakles, who underwent twelve grueling labors to absolve himself of the crimes he committed against his children. Driven mad by Hera, Herakles killed both of his children. In order to redeem himself after this act and subsequently earn immortality, Herakles had to complete the Twelve Labors. Herakles' labors were a favored subject of Athenian art, which made him "the hero who dominated the myth repertory of Athenian black figure," a popular figure in Athenian red figure pottery,<sup>45</sup> and a frequent subject of Athenian sculpture. In what follows, we will explore the way in which the serpents involved in some of Herakles' labors shaped his identity as a hero-god. For this reason, we will go through Herakles' life chronologically, culminating at his apotheosis and eventual extreme popularity. Just as I will move through the labors chronologically, I will also take a chronological approach to the visual culture within each labor.

Herakles' association with the serpent begins from his birth and continues into his apotheosis as a hero-god. Hera attempted to kill Herakles in his infancy by sending snakes to attack him, but he strangled both—each with one hand. An Early Classical hydria attributed to the Nausicaä Painter shows the infant Herakles handling two snakes, a testament to his strength (fig. 9). This should perhaps be seen as signifying that defining rite of passage in the life of the baby when it became clear Herakles would achieve great feats of strength as he matured. The episode with the snakes might perhaps also be seen as a harbinger of Herakles' apotheosis to come.

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<sup>45</sup> *ARFVAP* 226.



**Fig. 9. Hydria attributed to the Nausicaä Painter showing the infant Herakles strangling Hera's snakes. 460-450 BCE.<sup>46</sup>**

Herakles' labors also included battles in which he endured serpents. The hero's battle against the Lernean Hydra, the second of his twelve labors, exemplifies a step in his passage from human to deity. The Hydra was a monster with nine heads that rose from the waters off the coast of Lerna and tormented its inhabitants. In his book *Deities and Heroes in the Form of Snakes*, Elpis Mitropoulou claims that the Hydra, the snake with multiple heads that Herakles had to kill in his second labor, is a symbol of the evil forces in the world.<sup>47</sup> Whether this was true or not, it is certainly the case that the snakeheads of the hydra occupied a place between life and death. The Hydra was thought impossible to kill, for slaying one of its heads caused two more to grow in its place. Thus the feat against the serpent-headed-Hydra denotes Herakles' strength and his dominion over evil. He overcame the Hydra by burning the stump of each neck as he severed each

<sup>46</sup> Photo: metmuseum.org.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the hydra and on the snake as a symbol of evil forces, see Mitropoulou I.2.



new snakehead; caution ended liminality. This scene is frequent in the Athenian repertoire, both in sculpture and in vase painting.

A fragmentary pediment from a small building on the Archaic Acropolis depicts this labor (fig. 10). Fragments of the Hydra's coiling necks take up the entire right side of the pediment. A drawn reconstruction of the pediment (see detail) illustrates Herakles standing with caution in the center of the pediment at the moment of his victory. A stamnos attributed to the Syleus Painter also depicts Herakles with the Hydra (fig. 11).



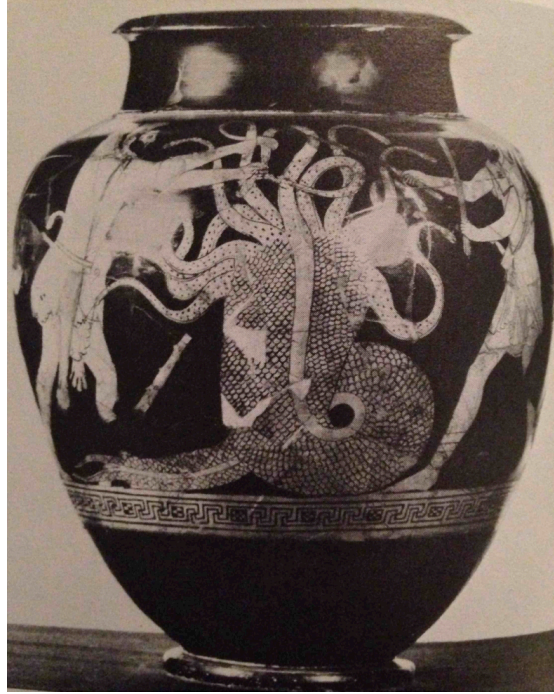
**Fig. 10. Herakles battling the Hydra on a pediment from a small building that stood on the Archaic Acropolis. c. 570 BCE.<sup>48</sup>**



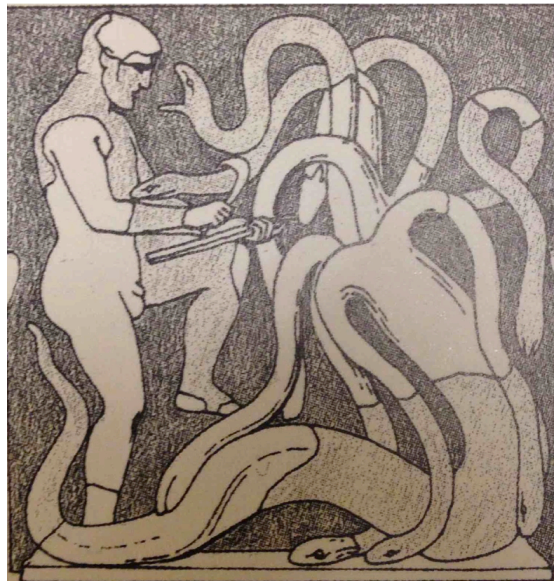
**Detail of fig. 10.**

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<sup>48</sup> Photos (fig. 10 and detail): Anne Stewart.



**Fig. 11. Herakles and the Hydra. Stamnos attributed to the Syleus Painter, 550-500 BCE.<sup>49</sup>**



**Fig. 12. Drawing of the second metope from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, 470-456 BCE.<sup>50</sup>**

This scene was also repeated in the Early Classical Period (480-450 BCE). The architectural sculpture in the metopes on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia (470-456 BCE)

<sup>49</sup> *ARFVAP*, fig. 198.

<sup>50</sup> *GSCP*, fig 22.

shows Herakles' twelve labors. In the second metope, Herakles defeats the Lernean Hydra, the destructive many-headed serpent of Lerna (fig. 12).<sup>51</sup> The popularity of the scene in Athenian art suggests the cultural interest in man's apotheosis.

This interest also manifests in the popular depiction of and literary references to Herakles' eleventh labor, in which he was commanded to enter the garden of the Hesperides and retrieve the golden apples, which were under close guard by the serpent Ladon. According to Euripides, Herakles "came to those minstrel maids, to their orchard in the west, to pluck from golden leaves the apple-bearing fruit, when he had slain the tawny dragon, whose terrible coils were twined all round to guard it; and he made his way into ocean's lairs, bringing calm to men that use the oar."<sup>52</sup> According to others, it was the Titan Atlas who plucked the apples while Herakles took his place momentarily, holding up the heavens as Atlas confronted the dragon.

This scene is a popular one in vase painting. A red-figure hydria attributed to the Hesperides Painter displays the scene (fig. 13). The hero-deity sits with the Hesperides in front of the tree on which hang the golden apples. The guardian snake of the golden apples of the Hesperides coils around the tree, watching Herakles and the Hesperides. This scene is repeated in sculpture from the period as well. A Classical relief, which only survives in copies, shows the same scene, almost identically (fig. 14).

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<sup>51</sup> For more depictions of Herakles and the Hydra, see Appendix A.

<sup>52</sup> Euripides, *Heracles* (421 BCE), lines 394-401.



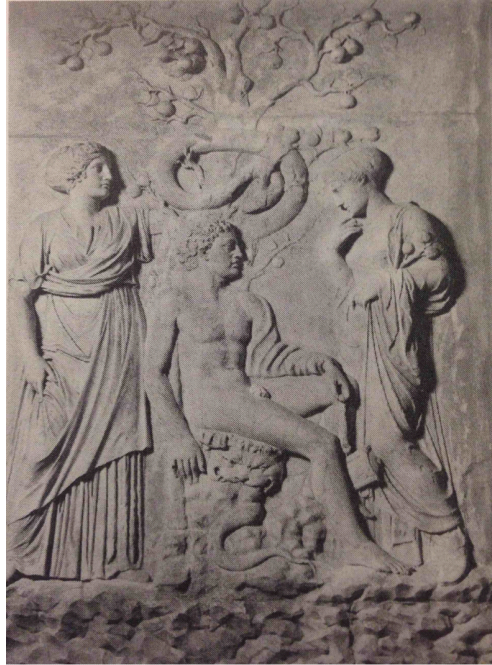
**Fig. 13. Herakles and the Hesperides. Red-figure hydria attributed to the Hesperides Painter, early 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.<sup>53</sup>**

In these instances, the serpent is clearly there as the dragon Ladon, guardian of the apples. But it is surely also significant that it inhabits the farthest edge of the world, the liminal space between earth and beyond, that is the garden of the Hesperides. It may also be significant that most versions of the myth (including that portrayed on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia) have Atlas retrieving the apples, while Herakles holds up the sky in his stead. Herakles thus occupies the most liminal of all vertical spaces in this version of the myth, just as Ladon inhabits the most liminal of all horizontal spaces. Herakles' existence in a vertical liminality physically manifests his liminal identity. Herakles is apotheosized, he moves up.

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<sup>53</sup> Photo: metmuseum.org.





**Fig. 14. Herakles in the garden of the Hesperides. Roman copy of a Greek original from c. 400 BCE.<sup>54</sup>**

The reiterated presence of the serpent in Herakles' artistic depictions suggests the role of the serpent in Herakles' journey to heroism. The association of journey and liminality implies that the serpent acted as a signifier of a liminal phase in which Herakles underwent an elongated process of attaining immortality. Turner explains how a subject may undergo an elongated phase of liminality that eventually leads to the subject's final destination:

[...] the spatial passage may involve a long, exacting pilgrimage and the crossing of many national frontiers before the subject reaches his goal [...] Sometimes this spatial symbolism may be the precursor of a real and permanent change of residence or geographical sphere of action.<sup>55</sup>

Herakles' passage to immortality parallels this pilgrimage and thus exists in a threshold that encompasses multiple liminal phases. The serpent, therefore, can be understood as a

<sup>54</sup> *GSCP*, fig. 239.4.

<sup>55</sup> Turner 17-18.

marker of certain liminal experiences that position Herakles in limbo between human and deity.

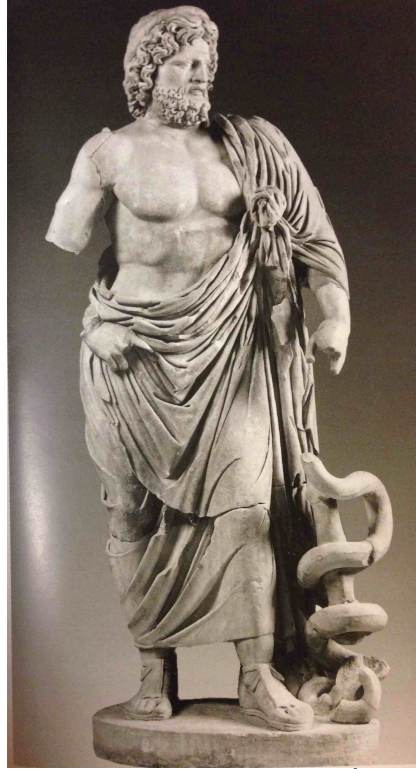
## 2 | *Asklepios*

Asklepios' serpent represents the liminal space between human and superhuman that exists within Asklepios' role as a hero-god. As a human, Asklepios held supernatural healing powers and was eventually apotheosized at the time of his death. During his lifetime, Asklepios was a mortal healer; but based on the presumption that Asklepios was attempting to raise the dead, Zeus struck Asklepios with his lightning bolt, leaving the healer dead. Regardless of the reasons behind his death, Asklepios was considered a god and beginning around 500 BCE, he was worshipped at multiple sanctuaries in Greece.<sup>56</sup>

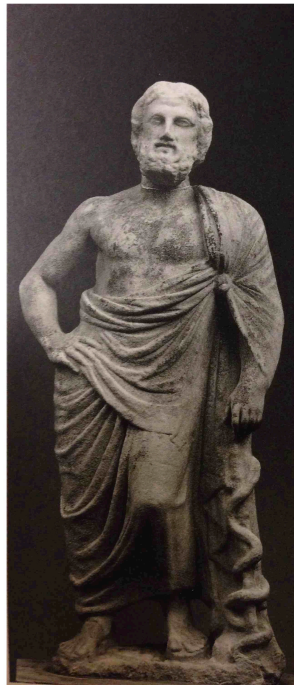
The serpent was Asklepios' primary attribute. Freestanding statues (fig. 15) and statuettes (fig. 16) picture the hero-deity alone with his serpent-coiled staff. Votive reliefs most often show the healing god accompanied by others (fig. 17). Asklepios was also pictured with his staff and a young man by his side, possibly a servant or someone of the sort, as was a common inclusion in art depicting heroes (fig. 18). In each of these scenarios, the serpentine attribute defines Asklepios as both mortal and god—as liminal. It is important to make the point here that Asklepios falls into this category, but the majority of discussion on the healer will take place in the next chapter.

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<sup>56</sup> For information on Asklepios, see Larson 192-195.



**Fig. 15. Asclepius, 'Este type'. Roman copy of a 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE Greek original.<sup>57</sup>**

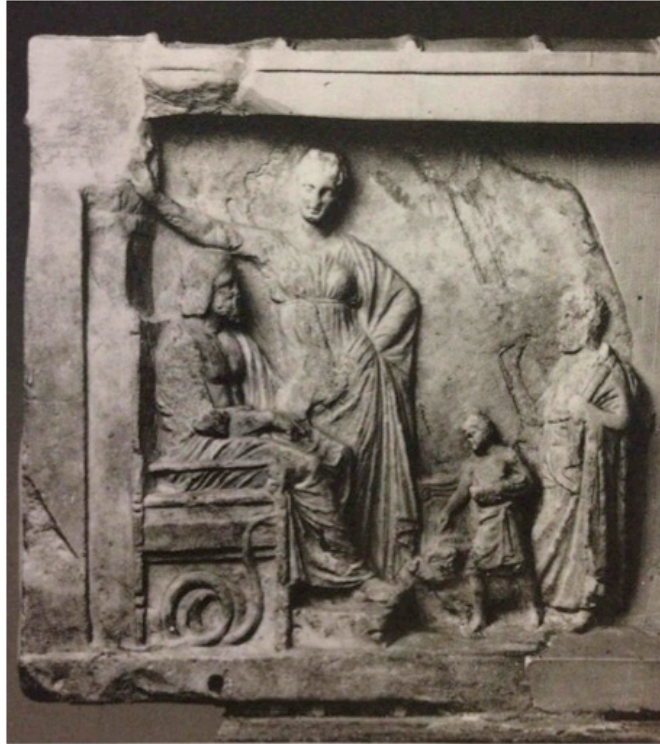


**Fig. 16. Statuette of Asclepius, the 'Este type,' a reworking in the late 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE.<sup>58</sup>**

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<sup>57</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 727.

<sup>58</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 545.



**Fig. 17. Asklepios, Hygieia, and worshippers. c. 320 BCE.<sup>59</sup>**



**Fig. 18. Asklepios and a young man, possibly a servant. A variant of the 'Ampurias type'.<sup>60</sup>**

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<sup>59</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 466.



Jason was the mythological hero who captured the Golden Fleece from the sacred grove of Ares. King Peleus ordered Jason to retrieve the Golden Fleece in return for Jason's kingship of Iolcus in Thessaly. Thus Jason and the Argonauts set out to fetch the Fleece, which hangs on a tree guarded by the Colchian Dragon in the sacred garden of Ares. Similar to Herakles in the garden of the Hesperides, Jason needed to somehow surpass the ever-wakeful dragon in order to fulfill this task. One account of this story explains that Jason surpassed the Colchian Dragon by killing the animal and the other suggests that Medea put the dragon to sleep, allowing Jason to grab the Golden Fleece (fig. 19).<sup>61</sup>



**Fig. 19. Bell krater showing Jason and Medea, 375-350 BCE.<sup>62</sup>**

<sup>60</sup> *LIMC* II.2, Asklepios 294. The date of this statue/type is widely debated. The *LIMC* II.1 mentions that R. Carpenter places this statue at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, but that G. Heiderich places the statue in the mid-4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE and that M. Almagro suggests that based on the technical process of Hellenistic sculpture and the treatment of the draping this statue should be dated to the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE. See *LIMC* II.1, pg. 896 for problems with dating.

<sup>61</sup> An Apulian red-figure vase in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli in Naples, Italy also depicts this version of the tale.

<sup>62</sup> *RFVA*, fig. 43.

A third version of the tale survives only as depicted on a cup attributed to the Douris painter (fig. 20). The cup shows the Colchian Dragon regurgitating Jason, whom the dragon had swallowed whole. Pallas Athena watches over Jason as the dragon ejects him from its grip. The depiction of the dragon with Jason effectively translates Jason's heroism through art. Although the dragon is directly relevant to Jason's story, the different depictions of him with the dragon suggest that the story was told differently, but that Jason's defeat of the dragon was the moment that defined him as a hero.



**Fig. 20. The disgorging of Jason. Cup by the Douris Painter, c. 470 BCE.<sup>63</sup>**

#### 4 | *Triptolemus*

Triptolemus was the apprentice of Demeter and a hero who eventually became one of the judges of the underworld.<sup>64</sup> A Classical relief shows the goddess with Triptolemus, who sits in a winged, snake-drawn chariot (fig. 21). The scene shown may

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<sup>63</sup> *ARFVAP*, fig. 288.

<sup>64</sup> "Triptolemus." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

represent a journey from earth to the underworld, since Triptolemus eventually became one of the judges of the underworld. Thus the serpent is the expression of this journey, the transition from one realm to another.



**Fig. 21. Stele showing Triptolemus in a winged chariot with Demeter behind him, 330 BCE.<sup>65</sup>**

### 5 | *The Cult of the Hero of the Slipper*

A votive relief found on the south slope of the Acropolis just south of the Theater of Dionysos provides evidence for a unique hero cult: the Cult of the Hero of the Slipper, whose sanctuary apparently existed near the Theater of Dionysos.<sup>66</sup> A vertical votive associated with this sanctuary depicts a small man at the top, presumably the hero, to whom a large snake glides upward (fig. 22). This snake most likely translates the liminal identity of the hero. In the subsequent deification that followed a hero's death, the hero became a figure both human and divine. This transition and ultimate liminal state is signaled by the large serpent on this relief.

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<sup>65</sup> LIMC IV.2, Demeter 379.

<sup>66</sup> See the description of fig. 443 in Kaltsas for more information on the find spot of this relief.



**Fig. 22. Votive relief from the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis, c. 350 BCE.<sup>67</sup>**

The snake's inhabitation of an admixed realm that transcends mortality and incorporates immortality parallels the experience of an Athenian living during the Classical period. As an autochthonous figure, the snake symbolically represents Athens. During the Classical Period, Athenian creative production exploded and the notion of man's ability pervaded its culture, leading to Protagoras' famous statement, 'man is the measure of all things.'<sup>68</sup> This further blurred the line dividing the divine from the human realm. In hero-cults, the serpent was used as a mechanism of translating and portraying the threshold between

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<sup>67</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 443.

<sup>68</sup> Protagoras of Abdera one of the most influential Sophists between 480 and 410 BCE. For a reference see Pollitt 69.

humanity and divinity and/or the interstice between supernal powers and the limitations of human abilities. Once apotheosized, a hero was thought able to return to earth, often in serpentine form.<sup>69</sup> The snake particularly factored as a mode of communicating the distinctive role of the hero as both human and divine in his abilities, qualifications, and characteristics.

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<sup>69</sup> Mitropoulou 54.

During the Classical period anxiety grew amongst Athenians about the new idea that men were responsible for their own fortunes.<sup>70</sup> Greeks were not only consumed with the notion of an afterlife, but also concerned with its imminence. The snake symbolizes man taking on his own fate; it signifies the ability to restore life and invoke death. This chapter will first use Classical and Hellenistic artifacts to explore the role of the snake at the interstice between life and death. Secondly, this chapter will explain the serpent's cyclical relationship to death and regeneration in the cases of Apollo, Asklepios, and the Thebans.

### 1 | *The interstice between life and death*

In their studies of liminality, Victor Turner and Arthur van Gennep explain three phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation.<sup>71</sup> The 'transition' phase is the liminal phase of a rite of passage, such as the passage from life to death:

The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another. This may take the form of a mere opening of doors or the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject's pre-ritual or preliminary status, and the other with his post-ritual or postliminal status.<sup>72</sup>

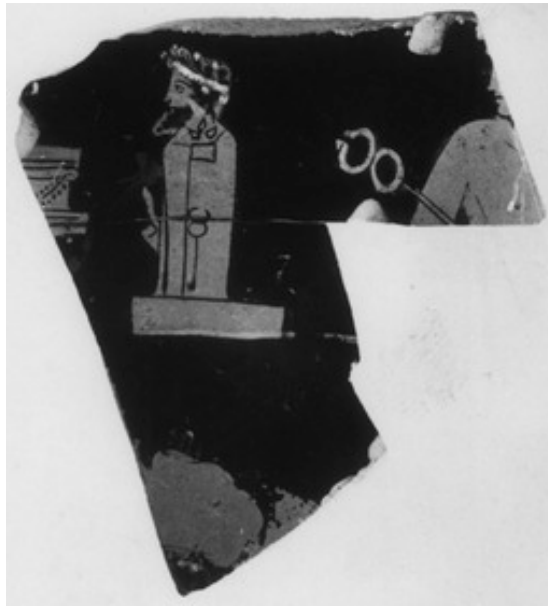
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<sup>70</sup> Pollitt 24.

<sup>71</sup> For a full explanation of these stages, see Turner 16-17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Considering the transitional threshold between life and death as a geographical movement from one place to another, a liminal experience can be understood as a journey, which may be physically or metaphorically undertaken by the subject. Hermes, the gateway god, acts as the physical manifestation of this liminal experience. Herms were erected in many places including doors and passages because they were considered the physical emblems of a passage. Herms of the funerary type show Hermes with the caduceus, a staff entwined by two serpents, both with mouths agape (fig. 23). Because Hermes was a messenger god and the guide of the dead, the caduceus-clad herm can be understood as a physical symbol of the liminal passage between life and the afterlife.<sup>73</sup>



**Fig. 23. Fragment of a red-figure bell krater from the Athenian Agora, c. 450-400 BCE.<sup>74</sup>**

Hermes' serpent-entwined caduceus, however, is one example of the two standard ways in which the caduceus is portrayed. The other portrayal of the caduceus is wrapped in ribbon, as opposed to serpents.<sup>75</sup> One reason for the difference in caduceus may be

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<sup>73</sup> Charlesworth 139.

<sup>74</sup> Beazley no. 29622.

<sup>75</sup> "Hermes." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*.

because Hermes (or at least his herms) often adorned doorways and passages through the home. Thus the snake may differentiate the purpose of the herm associated with the passage to the underworld from that adorned with a ribbon and associated with earthly passages.

The Tomb of Lyson and Kallikles in the Macedonian site of Lefkadia displays a similar understanding of the serpent as the signifier for the liminal space between life and death.<sup>76</sup> The painting on the altar of the west wall of the tomb's antechamber depicts a large snake, coiling upwards toward the antechamber's three taenia<sup>77</sup> (fig. 24). The snake seems to be in the act of hissing, and its ribbon-like black tongue stretches outward towards the decorated band above it. Stella G. Miller, who is responsible for the primary research and study of this tomb, claims that the snake may symbolize an act of heroizing the dead and/or allude to the sacred rites surrounding death during the Hellenistic period.<sup>78</sup> Thus as a symbol of the sacred rites associated with death, the snake signifies a transitional space between life and death that encompasses aspects of the deceased's post- and pre-liminal statuses. Further, as a "virtually universal feature of funerary iconography"<sup>79</sup> in Hellenistic Macedonia, the serpent can be understood as a standard signifier of the liminal space between life and death.

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<sup>76</sup> Miller dates the tomb anywhere between the latter half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and the earlier half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.

<sup>77</sup> Moldings often placed in the architrave of a Doric building.

<sup>78</sup> Miller 40.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. For more information on any aspect of the tomb, see Miller's book mentioned above.





**Fig. 24. Altar on the west wall of the antechamber in the Tomb of Lyson and Kallikles, c. 250-150 BCE.<sup>80</sup>**

Another funerary relic from the Hellenistic period similarly exposes the serpent's symbolic representation of life and death. In 1962, a series of cist and pit graves were discovered at Derveni, just outside Thessaloniki. The graves, which had been untouched since the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, yielded a series of metal goods. Of these, the most ornate and elaborate is a bronze volute krater, now referred to as the Derveni Krater, which Beryl Barr-Sharrar dates to c. 370 BCE.<sup>81</sup> Upon its finding, the vessel held the cremated bones of a man between the ages of 35-50 and a younger woman. Barr-Sharrar suggests that the

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<sup>80</sup> Miller, pl. V.a.

<sup>81</sup> Barr-Sharrar suggests this date for the krater and suggests that although it was buried and eventually found in Macedonia, the krater was in fact produced in Athens.

cremated bodies in the elaborate krater must have belonged to an elite class of Macedonians, who were possibly close affiliates of Alexander the Great.<sup>82</sup>

On the shoulder of each side of the vessel, two snakes coil up and above the handles, meeting each other at symmetrical points on the rim of the vessel (fig. 25). The erect heads of the serpents gain privileged height over the rest of the figures in relief—to such an effect that it seems as if they will peer into the vessel at any minute. This gesture is important because the content found within the krater, the cremated limbs, mirrors the krater's function. Just as a krater used at a living banquet would hold mixed wine and water, this vessel in its funerary context holds the mixed remains of a man and woman. The krater itself becomes a vessel that moves between a living and dying purpose, and the snakes at the rim highlight the transition in its use after death.



**Fig. 25. The Derveni Krater, side A. c. 325-200 BCE.<sup>83</sup>**

<sup>82</sup> Barr-Sharrar speculates this relationship.

<sup>83</sup> Barr-Sharrar, pl. 11.



**Detail of fig. 25. Right handle of the Derveni Krater.<sup>84</sup>**

Together with the other imagery on the krater, which depicts cycles of death and rebirth, the snakes almost cordon off the subjects (the cremated remains within the vessel) from the outside world. The separation of the subjects within the vessel from those looking unto the vessel and the patterns of death and rebirth in the krater's iconography suggest a liminal phase. In their ability to shed layers of skin, snakes often represented regenerative properties. Thus the cordoning off of the subjects may suggest incubation (this topic will be discussed below). We may think of this in light of Burkert's statement that Greeks often thought of the spinal cord of the dead as a property out of which the dead could regenerate as snakes. In fact, there exists a spatial gap between the two snakes—at one end a functional necessity and at the other a spatial representation of the interstice in which the cremated currently exist: an interstice between life and death.

The Hellenistic representations of the cyclical process of life and death also factors into votive reliefs. For instance, a relief in the naiskos<sup>85</sup> style shows a hero or a

<sup>84</sup> Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports.

god reclining as a family of worshippers and a nude slave tend to him (fig. 26). Directly left of the slave, a coiling snake rears upward toward the main figure and outward toward the family of worshippers. The relief depicts a funerary banquet and the snake most likely symbolizes a transitional space wherein the deceased celebrates his or her life with family members. This threshold thus communicates both with the living and the dead, occupying an intermediary space between the two realms.



**Fig. 26. Votive relief. Funerary banquet type, c. 325-300 BCE.<sup>86</sup>**

## 2 | *Death and regeneration in myth*

In a manner similar to the artifacts associated with real mortals just discussed, Athenian material and visual culture surrounding mythological figures from the Classical

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<sup>85</sup> A relief style that became popular during the Classical period. The naiskos is a little temple that acts as the framework in which relief sculpture is depicted. This type of relief denotes religious function.

<sup>86</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 487.

and Hellenistic periods display the liminal role of the serpent in regards to healing and death. In what follows, I will draw on literature and visual artifacts to support a reading of Apollo, Asklepios, Hygieia, and the Thebans as liminars<sup>87</sup> within whom this cycle is inherent. I will begin with Apollo because he is the professed source of Asklepios' healing powers and he uses serpents in his own contrastingly advantageous manner. Following the dissemination process of this healing power, I will discuss Asklepios and his daughter Hygieia in light of their sanctuaries and the wide body of votive reliefs that surround their cult. Last, I will discuss the Thebans, who are frequently presented in relation to this cycle in Classical Athenian literature.

Apollo is the god who best exemplifies the Greek Classical and Hellenistic ideal of male beauty. He is the beardless beauty, often effeminized, who oversees the arts (such as poetry and singing) and whose functions include oracular pronouncements, healing, and purification.<sup>88</sup> Apollo often appears in art with a bow and his arrows, which as they “sting like a serpent’s bite,”<sup>89</sup> shoot painful and deadly venom into their targets. The arrows, which turned to snakes after Apollo released them from his bow,<sup>90</sup> were the means by which Apollo delivered a slow and painful death to his victims. Freestanding sculptures of the god depict him with a serpent, usually climbing up his strut. The Apollo Belvedere, for instance depicts Apollo with his venomous weapon (fig. 27). The strut supporting Apollo's arm here acts as a tree trunk on which the snake coils in an elaborate

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<sup>87</sup> Turner's term. Refers to the subject undergoing the liminal phase.

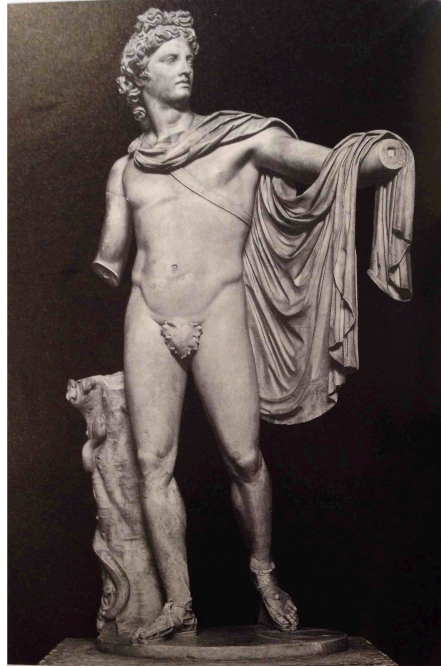
<sup>88</sup> “Apollo.” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.)

<sup>89</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides* (Trans. Herbert Weir Smyth), line 181, fn.1: “The arrow sped from Apollo's gold-wrought string is called a ‘winged glistening snake’ because it stings like a serpent's bite. There is also a latent word-play: ὄφις ‘snake’ suggests ἰός ‘snake's poison’ which also means ‘arrow.’”

<sup>90</sup> Apollo's arrows were first mentioned as poisonous in Homer's *Iliad*, but the notion that Apollo and his sister Artemis used their arrows to inflict plague and disease. See p. 30 n. 68 for a Classical reference from Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.



manner. The serpent's head faces up towards Apollo, who would have been holding a bow and arrow.



**Fig. 27. Apollo Belvedere. Roman copy of a Greek original from the late 4<sup>th</sup> - early 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE.<sup>91</sup>**

Although Apollo used the serpent as a method of invoking death, he was also associated with healing. He was the father and source of Asklepios' healing powers, which came in the form of a serpent.<sup>92</sup> Thus Apollo's liminal status stems from his relationship to Asklepios. Apollo harnessed the power of the serpent to invoke death; but he gave Asklepios the power to heal *through* the use of the serpent. As a property that restores life, healing is the binary opposite of killing; but in this relationship the serpent does both. The snake brings death to Apollo's enemies, but life to Asklepios' patients. Because the healing process was inherited from Apollo and is manifest in Asklepios as

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<sup>91</sup> *GSLCP*, fig. 64.

<sup>92</sup> See Larson 192 for more information regarding Apollo's healing properties and his relationship to Asklepios.

the agent of healing, we can understand the animal to occupy a marginal space between life and death. The snake has the ability to end life *and* the ability to restore it.

A votive relief from the Late Classical period that was found near the Asklepieion on the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis depicts Apollo in a mysterious landscape (fig. 28). The god is crouching behind a rock. The same scene also shows a young woman, a young man, a dog, and a snake. Although Asklepieia were often found outside the center of towns, this most likely does not describe the mysterious landscape, considering the addition of the young woman and the hunter in this scene. In fact, the votive seems more likely to reflect a hunting scene. If the artifact does in fact illustrate a hunting scene, the snake's presence is understandable.<sup>93</sup> What is more confusing is the fact that this scene was found in association with other artifacts from the Asklepieion in Athens. We cannot be sure what the artifact means, but it moves us nicely into the next topic of this chapter: Asklepios.



**Fig. 28. Votive relief showing Apollo, a snake and others in a mysterious landscape. c. 350 BCE.<sup>94</sup>**

<sup>93</sup> See “Athens, NM 1351 (Sculpture)” in the *Perseus Digital Library*.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Asklepios lived as a human, but was deified upon his death to become the God of Healing. Asklepios' temple at Epidauros was similar to an ancient hospital, to which the ill flocked to receive healing for a plethora of illnesses of mind and body. Known for healing his patients using snakes, Asklepios had a wide body of art that illustrated him with the snake as his attribute. Most often, Asklepios' art features him standing with a serpent coiled around his staff. Upon his death and subsequent deification, healing sanctuaries, or Asklepieia, were erected all over Greece. A votive relief from the Sanctuary of Amphiaraos, who was also a hero with healing properties, depicts Asklepios in the midst of the healing process (fig. 29). Snakes slither across the patients' bodies as Asklepios stands nearby and oversees the following procedure:

The actual method of cure was sleeping in the sanctuary, incubation; the god is expected to give instructions in a dream or else to effect a direct cure. The whole process is placed in the context of a sacrificial ritual, from the introductory piglet sacrifice on the eve of the incubation to the fulfillment of the vowed thank-offering.<sup>95</sup>

Burkert's above statement both elucidates and confuses an understanding of the illustrative votive. As an abbreviated segment of a larger ritual process, the regenerative properties of the serpent<sup>96</sup> perfectly fit Turner's definition of liminality. The healing itself takes place away from others, in a segregated state that lay in between two major states of being: alive and dead. The confusion thus occurs in the spectator's inability to identify the setting of this scene. Does this votive depict a dream? Are the sickly in a state of incubation? In other words, is this happening in *our* world or in *theirs*? This moment of confusion is a moment of the fantastic. The spectator at once is displaced in his or her hesitation, his or her inability to decipher which mode of reality the stele occupies.

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<sup>95</sup> Burkert 215.

<sup>96</sup> "Asclepius." *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*.





**Fig. 29. Votive relief from the Sanctuary of Amphiaraos, 400-350 BCE.<sup>97</sup>**

Sculptural evidence from the Asklepieion in Piraeus, for example, shows a slave and his family approaching Asklepios with a sacrifice (fig. 30). The snake is the only figure in the relief larger than Asklepios. The snake's size is of grave importance because in Greek art, scale was often determined by the importance of the person or figure shown: the larger the figure, the more important. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an attribute, specifically in sculpture, is "a conventional symbol added, as an accessory, to denote the character or show the identity of the personage represented."<sup>98</sup> Thus Asklepios's attribute is even larger than he, his quality or identity even larger than his physical human manifestation. The tangled coils of the serpent occupy the largest fraction

<sup>97</sup> *GSLCP*, fig. 142.

<sup>98</sup> For all definitions of "attribute" see the Oxford English Dictionary Online. For this definition specifically, see 3.

of the relief, which suggests that the serpent is the most important figure in the relief, even surpassing Asklepios in import. Moreover, the artist who sculpted this piece wished to stress the identity and power of Asklepios more than the human appearance of Asklepios himself.



**Fig. 30. Votive relief from the Asklepieion in Piraeus. c. 400-350 BCE.<sup>99</sup>**

Other visual evidence of Asklepios' healing powers from the Asklepieion in Athens depicts a series of people approaching Asklepios in a similar manner to that in the relief from Piraeus. The marked difference in the votives from Athens is that a member or multiple members of Asklepios' family almost always accompany him. The presence of Asklepios' family in his art is due mostly to the fact that each of his family members personified an aspect of healing. Epione, Asklepios' wife, refers to the gentle touch of a

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<sup>99</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 426.

physician; his daughter Hygieia personifies Health; and his “nymphlike” attendants included “Akeso (Relief), Iaso (Healing), and Panakeia (Universal Cure).”<sup>100</sup>



**Fig. 31. Naiskos relief showing Asklepios and family, c. 400-350 BCE.**<sup>101</sup>

A votive relief of the naiskos type shows a family of worshippers approaching Asklepios (fig. 31). Behind Asklepios stands Hygieia, his sons Machaon and Podeleirios, and his other daughters Iaso, Akeso, and Panakeia. The entire family is figured larger than the worshippers, which denotes their statuses as deities. Asklepios’ staff, on which climbs his attributive serpent, marks another division between the divine family and the worshippers. The serpent’s head tilts outward from the staff towards Asklepios, in allegiance to the hero-god. A similar example from the Late Classical period is an elaborate votive in the naiskos style that presumably depicts the cella<sup>102</sup> of a temple (fig.

<sup>100</sup> Larson 193. See also for more information on the family of Asklepios.

<sup>101</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 428.

<sup>102</sup> The cella or naos was the main room inside of a Greek temple. In most temples, this was the room that featured the statue of the god or goddess to whom the temple belonged. Greek art often depicts deities in anthropomorphic situations, which may be why Asklepios sits and greets people in some of these votives.



32). The monument, which was found in a shrine on the south slope of the Acropolis, shows worshippers lined up in front of Asklepios. Asklepios sits on a throne with his snake-coiled staff behind him. Hygieia and Epione accompany him.



**Fig. 32. Naikos relief from the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis. c. 350 BCE.<sup>103</sup>**

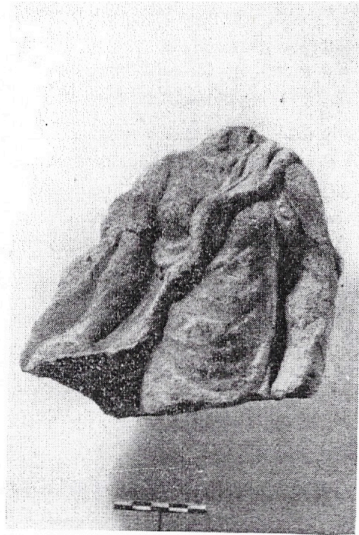
The most common of Asklepios' family members illustrated with the hero-god is his daughter, Hygieia. Hygieia is the personification of Health and often played a role alongside her father in the healing process. As the cult of Asklepios grew in popularity during the Hellenistic period, the god was depicted in the same or a similar manner to that of the Classical period. For instance, a votive relief from the Asklepieion in Athens reflects those from the Classical period.

Hygieia's prominent role as representative of this healing cult and her independent role as the personification of Health eventually led to her sole eminence in art. A fragmentary statue in the Agora Museum shows Hygieia with a snake wrapped

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<sup>103</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 442.

around her shoulder (fig. 33a). The snake would have wrapped across her chest, rearing towards the phiale<sup>104</sup> in her right hand. A copy of the statue from the Hermitage Museum provides an example of what this statue may have looked like (fig. 33b).



**Fig. 33a. Fragment of Hygieia and a snake, possibly the 'Hope Hygieia' type, c. 250-200 BCE.<sup>105</sup>**



**Fig. 33b. Roman copy of the 'Hope Hygieia.'<sup>106</sup>**

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<sup>104</sup> Shallow bowl used for pouring libations.

<sup>105</sup> Mitropoulou, fig. 94.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, fig. 95a.

As their attribute, the snake denotes Asklepios' and Hygieia's roles as healers. In this ability, Asklepios and Hygieia hold the power to restore life in patients who otherwise would have soon faced death. The fact that patients came to Asklepios in his hospitals further emphasizes the hero-god's liminal power: "Hospitalization is a liminal state between health and re-found health or death. It is contained, transitional, and potentially life-changing."<sup>107</sup> Thus the serpent as attribute in this context shows Asklepios and Hygieia as occupying liminal identities between life and death. Indeed, Asklepios' ability to restore life in the sick (and even, in one case, bring the dead back to life) builds his liminal character: "All the Greeks agreed that Asklepios was a mortal healer who had perished, struck by Zeus' lightning bolt, for presuming to raise the dead."<sup>108</sup> Although Zeus rid Asklepios of his mortality, Apollo, Asklepios' father, provided his son with his healing powers.<sup>109</sup> Thus in his death, Asklepios the mortal-turned-god who gained the power of life. Asklepios' serpentine attribute symbolically represents this liminal nature—the hero-god's space in the threshold that lies between life and death, a space occupied by himself and at the same time defied by his healing powers.

This threshold reaches an entirely different race of men who share the same cyclical relationship to life and death as Apollo, Asklepios, and Hygieia. According to Greek myth, the Thebans were a ferocious race of men who sprang from the earth where Cadmus had sowed the teeth of Ares' dragon. Cadmus was a Phoenician prince and the founder of Thebes, who Athena demanded to slay Ares' dragon. After doing so, Cadmus sowed the dragon's teeth, which in turn sprouted into the Thebans. In Euripides'

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<sup>107</sup> Carson 69. For more on hospitals as liminal locales, see the chapter titled "The Liminal Locale of Hospitalization," 69-73.

<sup>108</sup> Larson 192.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

*Phoenissae* (411 BCE), the Chorus explains that these men were united with their beloved earth not only as its sons, but also by the act of “grim slaughter.”<sup>110</sup> Further, the Thebans were often found “bedewing with blood the ground that had shown them to the sunlit breath of heaven.”<sup>111</sup> To connect with the earth that bore them, the Thebans engage in acts of killing—to complement their lives, they must perform the act of death. In this manner, the serpent-born identity of the Theban race makes them inherently liminal beings.

In the body of textual evidence regarding Thebes and its people, serpent symbolism is used both as a direct reference to the Thebans and metaphorically to represent either their violent nature or the violent nature of someone else. Plato, for example, made references both directly to the Thebans and more loosely to their brutishness through his use of the term “Cadmeian.” In *Laws*, Plato argues that education may bring victory, but that victory in battle may also bring a certain ignorance, which causes men to grow insolent. This insolence, Plato continues, causes men to become filled with vices. Thus “whereas education has never yet proved to be ‘Cadmeian,’ the victories which men win in war often have been, and will be, ‘Cadmeian’.”<sup>112</sup> According to R.G. Bury, who translated *Laws*, ‘Cadmeian’ is an adjective that suggests the proverbial expression meaning “involving more loss than gain,” which “possibly derived from the fate of the ‘Sparti’ (sprung from the dragon’s teeth sown by Cadmus, founder of Thebes) who slew one another.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> See Euripides, *Phoenissae*, lines 655-680 (Trans. E.P. Coleridge).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Plato, *Laws* 1.641c. See this section of *Laws* also for Plato’s philosophy regarding victory and insolence.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 1.641c, fn. 1. For similar references by Plato see *Sophist* 247c and fn. 1 in the same section.

Considerably liminal already in that the Thebans were humans born from the remains of a dragon, the Thebans' activity while living complicates the idea that they were born from the dragon. The mother to the Theban race, the serpent also acted as a prophetic symbol "of the slaughter to come."<sup>114</sup> The violent tendencies of the Thebans were also associated with the dragon by the Athenians when they described their hostile northern neighbors. Ergo, the Thebans' inheritance of both life and a killer instinct from the dragon solidifies the animal's identity as a medium between life and death.

Apollo, Hermes, Asklepios, Hygieia, and the Thebans exemplify the role of the serpent as a symbol of the threshold that exists between life and death. As an accompaniment of the god who embodied this threshold, the serpent adorned Hermes' herms; as a mechanism for death used by a god associated with healing, the serpent found its place with Apollo; as a marker of identity for Asklepios and for Hygieia, the serpent held a character with qualities of both life and death; and as the animal that gave life to the Thebans only to promote their willingness to kill, the serpent acts as a channel of both life and death that penetrates this race. It is in these contexts that the serpent transcends its role as merely the nurse of death to become the signifier of a medium between two realms.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Bacchylides, *Epinicians*, *Ode 9*, lines 13-14.

<sup>115</sup> The identification of the serpent as the 'nurse of death' comes from Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (specifically lines 834-838).



### SECTION III

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#### Anxiety

The *Dodekatheon*<sup>116</sup> or the Twelve Olympians describes those gods who reside on Mt. Olympus. In light of modern thought, these twelve would be considered the ‘heavenly’ gods. The Olympians are thought of primarily in opposition to the Chthonic deities, who rule the underworld. Derived from the ancient Greek words *χθών* meaning ‘earth’<sup>117</sup> and *χθόνιος*, meaning in, under, or beneath the earth,<sup>118</sup> chthonic can be understood “as a marker for a set of divine characteristics and ritual acts which are more often than not found together, and which connote relations with the land, the dead, or the underworld.”<sup>119</sup> Although common rituals and rites can be found associated with the gods of both domains, the similarities are “differentiated in such a way that they are placed unmistakably on one side or the other, so emphasizing a fundamental opposition.”<sup>120</sup>

Extant between these binaries, however, is a marginal space characterized by the tension between these two spheres and occupied by gods who carry connotations of both. The categorical value of this space is thus the *limen*, the threshold between two distinct classifications. These gods are not solely Olympic nor Chthonian, but a mixture of the two. The admixture of two fundamentally opposed realms thus poses a problem in instituting a systematic method of differentiating between the two differing types of deities. The serpent signifies the *limen* by providing the deity’s Olympic identity with power to transcend its bounds. Symbolically, the species “bring[s] into the field of

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<sup>116</sup> Greek: Δωδεκάθεον.

<sup>117</sup> Lidell, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Larson 12.

<sup>120</sup> Burkert 199. For more on the difference between Olympian and Chthonic realms see Chapter IV.3.

consciousness a special chthonic (underworld) message.”<sup>121</sup> Ophidian imagery in this case represents the ability of a deity to “penetrate below and above, near and far.”<sup>122</sup> This creates within the Athenian people an anxiety in the ever-closing gap between man and god.

### 1 | *Zeus Meilichios*

In both modern and ancient contexts, Zeus most often acts as the signifier of a king, the Father of the Sky, the sovereign deity of Mt. Olympus. Although this is the most pervasive of Zeus’ many epithets, Athenians popularized and widely worshipped a chthonic Zeus known as Zeus Meilichios.<sup>123</sup> *Meilichios*, meaning “the Mild”<sup>124</sup> was a cult of Zeus focused predominantly on welfare. Zeus Meilichios demonstrated both malevolent and benevolent attitudes in regards to supplicatory prayers and sacrifices by either granting welfare to or withholding it from suppliants.<sup>125</sup> Although this cult was specifically worshipped during the Diasia and the Pompaia festivals, a number of votive reliefs demonstrate that the cult of Zeus Meilichios was one of the most popular cults in Athens.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Jung 155.

<sup>122</sup> Burkert 208.

<sup>123</sup> See Lalonde 45 and Simon 12 for more information regarding the popularity of this particular cult of Zeus.

<sup>124</sup> Larson 22.

<sup>125</sup> Lalonde 45.

<sup>126</sup> The Diasia were the festivals for Zeus, see Simon 12-13 for more information. The Pompaia was an Athenian festival that took place at the time when crops were being sowed and/or planted; for more information see Larson 22.



**Fig. 34. Votive relief dedicated to Zeus Meilichios, c. 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE.<sup>127</sup>**

Votive reliefs from Athens reveal that while assuming this identity, Zeus assumed one of two forms: a bearded snake (fig. 34) or a bearded, elderly male, seated with a snake beside him. In his extensive study of an Athenian shrine to Zeus Meilichios, Gerald V. Lalonde explains the following of Zeus taking on the form of a snake: "...The bearded snake was meant to combine the zoomorphic/chthonic and anthropomorphic/Olympian conceptions of the god."<sup>128</sup> Zeus Meilichios' ability to shift from snake to deity acts as a physical representation of his liminality. Creatures with the ability to shift between forms are often considered liminal in that they occupy a space *in between* two categories of being (this will be discussed later on). Although the snake was often considered a marker

<sup>127</sup> Lalonde, fig. 29 (**ZM 35**).

<sup>128</sup> Ibid 46.

for chthonic powers, in the case of Zeus Meilichios the snake's role exceeds mere chthonic associations. Looking to the votives that show the deity in human form, his duality remains clear: "The depiction of Zeus Meilichios on Athenian votive reliefs as a mature, bearded male probably favors his Olympian aspect but without any denial of his chthonic powers."<sup>129</sup>

Considering Zeus was the father of the gods, his chthonic role as Meilichios shifts the god's identity into a gray area wherein his Olympian epithet is confronted with his identity as the "other Zeus," the "subterranean Zeus."<sup>130</sup> Moreover, the serpent form and attribute represents a rationalizing of dual identities. In thinking of Zeus as an anthropomorphized figure and as an animal, Athenians grappled with the notion of a god who both ruled the heavens and took command in the underworld, one who could both punish with his thunderbolt and improve the welfare of suppliants.

## 2 | *Athena*

Both Elpis Mitropoulou and Jennifer Larson believe that the snake is Athena's chthonic animal. During the Panathenaia, a young boy would feed Athena's snake honey cakes, a food often fed to underworld animals.<sup>131</sup> On accounts outside of the Panathenaia, Athenians also fed Athena's snake cakes and food offerings as a part of their worship of the goddess (fig. 35).<sup>132</sup> Larson states, "Even an Olympian deity such as Athena Polias at Athens may have chthonian features, such as her association with the snake, a creature

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid 47.

<sup>130</sup> Burkert 201.

<sup>131</sup> Mitropoulou 50.

<sup>132</sup> Simon 70.

symbolic of the earth.”<sup>133</sup> In fact, Athena shared a sanctuary with Zeus Meilichios in Athens during the fifth century. Additionally, Athena often accompanied Zeus while the latter was in his chthonic guise as serpent.<sup>134</sup>



**Fig. 35. Apulian vase showing Athena and her ‘chthonic’ animal. c. 420-410 BCE.**<sup>135</sup>

The dual identities of deities such as Zeus Meilichios and Athena suggest that the snake represents a liminal space between Olympian and Chthonian. Due to the notion of the snake as an animal closely associated with the earth, it is possible that employing snake iconography was a method of imbuing deities with earthliness and a link to the underworld that further complicated the Olympic identity of the aforementioned gods. The juxtaposition of the heavenly with the earthly creates a way of identifying the god within a threshold that is neither chthonic nor Olympic, but that blends the two realms.

<sup>133</sup> Larson 12.

<sup>134</sup> For more information on Athena’s relationship to Zeus Meilichios see Larson 55.

<sup>135</sup> *CVA*. Germany 47, Berlin 9, pl. 36.1.

Thus in this threshold the instability and/or unpredictability of a god's or goddess' actions could be rationalized through a process of understanding this god or goddess as a liminal character. These gods and goddesses reconcile identities that are neither fully Olympic nor entirely chthonic, but mixtures of both.

The possible identity of Olympic deities as chthonic presents the anxiety felt by men during the High Classical period. The High Classical marks a time during which man was becoming increasingly aware of his control over his own fate. Pollitt contends that Classical art translates a confidence to experiment with new representations of internality as well as “a new uneasiness of mind produced by the growing belief that men were responsible for their own fortunes, good or bad.”<sup>136</sup> As we have seen in Section II, the Classical period was very much about the ascension of man and the extension of his individual power in the *polis*; a new responsibility that brought with it “a *new self-confidence* and a *new uneasiness*.”<sup>137</sup>

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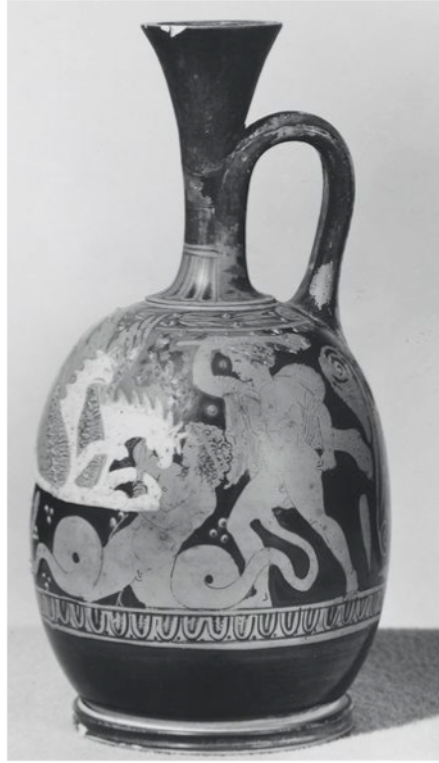
<sup>136</sup> Pollitt 24.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid 22.

Many snakes appear in Classical Athenian visual and material culture as partially embodied by or as alternate identities to humans. The serpent liberates the human from the rigidity of the body and bestows fluidity upon him or her. It is thus appropriate that it comes to signify those who could move between forms or shapes. With a privileged capability to move between species, the shape-shifter exists in a threshold of multiplicity. This multiplicity of identity creates difficulties in classifying the shape-shifter. Is he or she a human? An animal? Both? The merging of two (or more) forms creates a marginal form between human and inhuman: the shape-shifter. These liminal beings come in one of two forms: either physically displaying two different forms or as humans that undergo metamorphoses.

Those who embody two differing forms at once are generally part-human, part-snake. This category includes beings such as Giants (fig. 36), who have the torso and head of a human, but have serpentine tails instead of legs. The transitional beings, those who morph into other species, only occupy one physical form at a time. Their liminality lies in their ability to transition.





**Fig. 36. Apulian lekythos, c. 400-375 BCE.<sup>138</sup>**

I have divided this chapter into three sub-sections that reflect the subcategories of shape-shifters discussed above. The first section of this chapter will explore half-men, half-snakes including Erichthonios and Cecrops. The second section will discuss Achelous, who was half-man, half-snake and who also possessed the ability to undergo metamorphosis. The third section will examine beings with the ability to transition between two or more forms, such as Cadmus, Orestes, and Thetis.

### 1 | *The man-snake*

Erichthonios, mentioned already in Section I, became an early king of Athens and is often associated with the cults on the Acropolis.<sup>139</sup> His tribe was unified with that of

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<sup>138</sup> LIMC, Gigantes 389 (via iconiclmc.ch).

Cecrops, another early king.<sup>140</sup> Upon his birth, Athena put Erichthonios in a box and entrusted him to two of the daughters of Cecrops on the condition that the girls not open the box. Disobeying Athena's orders, the girls opened the box and saw Erichthonios in the form of a snake, a sight so ghastly that they immediately went mad and jumped off the Acropolis to their deaths. Although his half-serpentine form makes Erichthonios somewhat scary, it really acts as an emblem of power. The snake embodiment enables Erichthonios to assume a liminal position as king, a position that exists in between humanity and divinity.

Cecrops displays the same aspect of liminality through his serpentine tail (fig. 37). His snake tail both embodies and enables liminality. Like that of Erichthonios, Cecrops' tail gives him power and strength. Demosthenes explains this in his *Funeral Speech* (338 BCE): "The Cecropidae were well aware that their founder was reputed to have been part dragon, part human, for no other reason than this, that in understanding he was like a man, in strength like a dragon."<sup>141</sup> Mitropoulou also adds that the serpentine-tail could have been a method of showing Cecrops' superhuman powers.<sup>142</sup> Including those attributes discussed in Section I, Cecrops' snake tail represents the many liminal spaces that he embodies and bestows him with strength and power.

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<sup>139</sup> "Erichthonius." *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*.

<sup>140</sup> For more information on Erichthonios and the relationship between Erichthonios and Cecrops, see Mitropoulou 25-26.

<sup>141</sup> Demosthenes, *Funeral Speech*, section 30. Trans. Norman W. DeWitt and Norman J. DeWitt.

<sup>142</sup> From Mitropoulou 24. For more on Cecrops, see Mitropoulou 24-25.

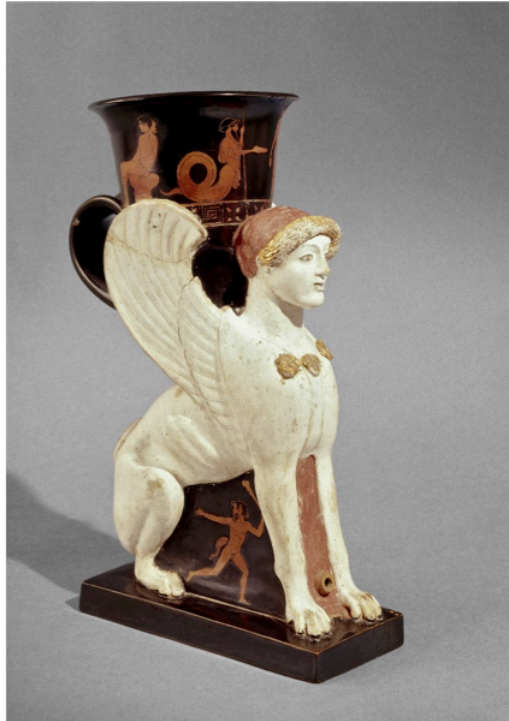


Fig. 37. Rhyton from the Brygos Tomb, c. 470-460 BCE.<sup>143</sup>



Detail of fig. 37.

## 2 | *Achelous*

<sup>143</sup> Britishmuseum.org.

Achelous was a river god who had the ability to traverse many categories of form, but most often appears on vases with a man's torso and a snake's tail (fig. 38). In

Sophocles' play *Trachiniae* (430 BCE), Deianeira reveals this ability in Achelous:

For my suitor was a river-god, Achelous, who in three shapes was always asking me from my father—coming now as a bull in visible form, now as a serpent, sheeny and coiled... In the expectation that such a suitor would get me, I was always praying in my misery that I might die, before I should ever approach that marriage-bed.<sup>144</sup>

In this manner the river-god Achelous appears under the guise of the serpent as a means of embodying an identity that may win Deianeira's hand in marriage. Implicit in her fear that she may ever approach a marriage-bed with Achelous, however, is Deianeira's fear of Achelous' capacity for assuming multiple identities.



Fig. 38. Herakles wrestling Achelous. Red figure stamnos, side A. c. 530-500 BCE.<sup>145</sup>

### 3 | Transformers

<sup>144</sup> Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, lines 9-16.

<sup>145</sup> Britishmuseum.org.

Cadmus is a liminal being who has the capacity to switch back and forth between snake and human. In Euripides' *Bacchae* (410 BCE), Dionysus explains this transformation in the following speech:

...changing your form, you will become a dragon, and your wife, Harmonia, Ares' daughter, whom you though mortal held in marriage, will be turned into a beast, and will receive in exchange the form of a serpent. And as the oracle of Zeus says, you will drive along with your wife a chariot of heifers, ruling over barbarians. You will sack many cities with a force of countless numbers. And when they plunder the oracle of Apollo, they will have a miserable return, but Ares will protect you and Harmonia will settle your life in the land of the blessed.<sup>146</sup>

A calyx krater shows Cadmus in human form, face to face with a serpent (fig. 39). The scene exhibits Cadmus' ability to assume this animalistic form. Dionysus reveals that as a serpent, Cadmus will sack cities and rule over barbarians. Now an animal, his previous humanity gives him an advantage over the other savage races. As king, Cadmus becomes a liminal who exists between the mortal and the divine realms. He will not be one of them, but he will be their king—a title that puts Cadmus in a margin of society. Thus in a physically liminal being also is an inherent change in character that bestows upon Cadmus a liminal personality.

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<sup>146</sup> Euripides, *Bacchae*, lines 1330-1338.



**Fig. 39. Cadmus and the dragon. Red figure calyx krater attributed to the Sprechels Painter, c. 475-425.<sup>147</sup>**

Aeschylus' portrayal of Orestes in his *Libation Bearers* (468 BCE) is quite similar. In the play, Orestes' mother dreams that she births a snake, which draws blood from her breast upon its first meal.<sup>148</sup> Having gained knowledge of this, Orestes claims that because Clytemnestra mothered this "portentous thing of horror, she must die by violence,"<sup>149</sup> and that he, "turned serpent, [is] her killer, as this dream declares."<sup>150</sup> In this case, Orestes adopts a bestial guise for this bestial act. Orestes' physical transformation symbolizes his transformation from rational *man* to irrational *barbarian* or any *other* creature.

In creating Orestes' physical metamorphosis, Aeschylus grounds the shifting identities of men in war through Orestes' ability to shift physically from man to snake. Although Orestes does not actually go to war, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, his

<sup>147</sup> *ARFVCP*, fig. 19.

<sup>148</sup> Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, lines 525-533.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, lines 547-548.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, lines 548-549.



symbolic transformation of person and physical transformation into serpent exposes his liminal abilities and his existence within a margin that divides humans and animals.

Thetis' ability to transform species differs slightly. Similar to Deianeira, Thetis' relationship to transformation has to do with marriage. In Thetis' case, however, she shifts to escape her pursuer, whereas Achelous shifted forms as a means of pursuing Deianeira. Thetis belongs to the Nereids, a group of sea-goddesses, whose identity already places her on the outer edge of the divine domain.<sup>151</sup> Prophesied to have a son stronger than his father, Thetis could not marry a deity. Thus she became wife and captive of the mortal Peleus. In order to marry the Nereid, Peleus had to secure and rape her while she changed forms—from fire to water to wind to a tree, a bird, a tiger, a lion, a snake, and a cuttle-fish—her escape tactic ultimately proving unsuccessful.<sup>152</sup>



**Fig. 40. Peleus wrestling with Thetis. Kylix signed by Peithinos, c. 500 BCE.<sup>153</sup>**

<sup>151</sup> Burkert 172.

<sup>152</sup> "Peleus." Oxford Classical Dictionary (3 rev. ed.) eds. Hornblower and Spawforth.

<sup>153</sup> *ARFVAP*, fig. 214.1. See also NM 12584.

The tondo of a late Archaic kylix attributed to Peithinos illustrates Peleus seizing Thetis (fig. 40). Peleus grips Thetis' waist as the sea goddess relinquishes her other forms, the lion and the snake. In the very placement of the animals in this vase Thetis conveys liminality—she is painted in between two animals, both of which she switched into, presumably in the order shown on the vase.<sup>154</sup> The serpents crawling up the couple's arms and the lion Thetis has just dropped from her free hand symbolize her ineffectual desire to escape his grip through shifts of species.

As exemplified in the dual physicality and identities of Achelous, Cadmus, Erichthonios, Cecrops, Orestes, and Thetis, the ability to change forms into a serpent or the physical manifestation of both human and serpent qualities was a method by which Athenian visual culture, myth, and text conveyed a sense of liminality. Not only physically liminal, the aforementioned beings also often exhibited liminal dispositions and shape-shifting abilities.

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<sup>154</sup> See description of “Berlin F 2279 (Vase)” in the *Perseus Digital Library*.



The serpent was used as a mechanism for communicating one's blending of good and evil attributes. This was the case with Orestes, who in shifting from man to snake underwent a parallel shift in his identity. Once a beloved child, Orestes became an adult murderer. These attributes often also included a person or god's tendency both for kindness and for anger. For instance, in *Rhetoric* (350 BCE), Aristotle exposes the ability of man to be harsh and severe through the analogous connection between man and snake. Of a legislator named Draco, he writes, his "laws were not those of a man, but of a dragon, so severe were they."<sup>155</sup> In what follows, I will explain how the serpent signifies both good and evil action in Zeus Meilichios, the Gorgons and Gorgoneia, the Maenads, and Laocoön.

### 1 | *Zeus Meilichios*

As discussed already, "Chthonian Zeus"<sup>156</sup> or Zeus Meilichios was a liminal being who held a position between chthonic and divine. Zeus Meilichios also occupied a liminal space between two personalities. The chthonian god, whose identity as 'mild' was merely a euphemism,<sup>157</sup> had the ability to be both kind and dangerous; but to be kind, the god required much appeasement from his worshippers. Xenophon mentions the god's

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<sup>155</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.23.29.

<sup>156</sup> Larson 21.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

interstitial position between kindness and anger. Xenophon writes that a seer claimed that the writer's financial struggles were the result of a failed sacrifice to Zeus Meilichios. Directly following his encounter with the seer, Xenophon sacrificed two pigs at the altar of Zeus Meilichios, at which point his financial troubles were resolved.<sup>158</sup>



**Fig. 41. Votive relief from Vatrachonisi, c. 350-300 BCE.<sup>159</sup>**

Two votive reliefs symbolically represent the god as a serpent. The first, dedicated to Zeus Meilichios by Aristomenes, shows three suppliants approaching a large, intricately coiled snake (fig. 41). The second, a fragmentary dedication to Zeus

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Kaltsas, fig. 469.

Meilichios from the Athenian Agora, also shows the god in serpent form (fig. 42). In what is left of this stele, the serpentine god—bearded and with mouth agape—looks upon a male head in a seemingly angered gesture. Unfortunately, the man's face has been weathered to such an extent that his expression is practically indecipherable. For this reason it is hard to understand the moment depicted in this scene, but the position of the god in relation to the man suggests that the man was approaching the god with understandable caution. The scene possibly shows a moment in which a worshipper attempts to appease the god. The Athenian Agora was the center of Athenian trade and commerce, and the stele's findspot may illuminate its purpose. Considering Xenophon's note on Meilichios' role in financial welfare and the find spot of the votive, it seems the votive could have been a dedication made to the deity in hopes of receiving financial aid.



**Fig. 42. Votive relief from the Athenian Agora, c. 330 BCE.<sup>160</sup>**

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<sup>160</sup> ASCSA.net.

## 2 | *Gorgons and Gorgoneia*

Gorgons were females who had snakes for hair and were sometimes depicted with wings. Literature and material culture represent Gorgons both in their apotropaic roles and as wicked creatures that sport poisonous, snaky locks.<sup>161</sup> First I will review the representation of Gorgoneia in Archaic and Classical visual culture and then move into the Gorgon's liminal role both as protector from evil and as itself evil in Classical literature.



**Fig. 43. Terracotta akroterion from the Hekatompedon, c. 575-550 BCE.<sup>162</sup>**

Archaic and Classical visual culture made great use of the Gorgon in her apotropaic function. The Gorgon appears in architecture and vase painting. Two main examples of architectural sculpture will suffice to demonstrate the overall phenomenon:

<sup>161</sup> Euripides, *Ion*, line 1015. Trans. Robert Potter.

<sup>162</sup> Photo: David Gill.

an akroterion<sup>163</sup> from the Archaic temple of Athena on the Acropolis (also called the Hekatompedon) (Fig. 43) and the west pediment from the Archaic Temple of Artemis at Corfu (Fig. 44). The pedimental sculpture from Corfu is much like the akroterion from Athens. Both show the gorgon's face in frontal position, ringed with snaky hair and staring out at the viewer with hideous mouth agape and enormous eyes, which suggests her apotropaic function.<sup>164</sup> The brute depiction of the Gorgon in Athenian art owes itself to her function; the wide-eyed glare of the Gorgon was said to turn men to stone.<sup>165</sup> The architectural use of the Gorgon on temples specifically keeps evil from reaching the sacred area.



**Fig. 44. Medusa on the west pediment of the Artemis temple at Corfu, c. 600-580 BCE.<sup>166</sup>**

<sup>163</sup> Akroteria are architectural ornaments placed at the apex of the pediment (usually on a temple).

<sup>164</sup> For information on the akroterion from the Hekatompedon see “Athens, Acropolis 701 (Sculpture) in the *Perseus Digital Library*. Information regarding the pediment from Corfu comes from Anne Stewart’s lecture “6<sup>th</sup> c. Architectural Sculpture in the Akropolis Museum” (2014).

<sup>165</sup> “Gorgon.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*.

<sup>166</sup> Photo: “Archaic Architecture and Architectural Sculpture.”



Vase painting from the Archaic period demonstrates a similar usage of the Gorgon. The “Louvre Dinos” shows a different depiction of Gorgons in Athenian vase painting (fig. 45). The dinos served a similar function to a footed krater, but adopted its shape from round-bottomed metal cauldrons. The vessel consists of two parts, the bowl and the tall foot on which the bowl rests. The ornamentation on the shoulders of the bowl, attributed to the Gorgon painter, depicts Medusa and her sisters running after Perseus. The remainder of the vessel pictorially narrates Peleus and Thetis’ wedding.<sup>167</sup>



**Fig. 45. The Louvre Dinos, 600-580 BCE.<sup>168</sup>**

<sup>167</sup> See Beazley, *The Development of Attic Black Figure* (rev. ed., vol. 24) for an extensive review of the Louvre Dinos.

<sup>168</sup> Photo: [louvre.fr](http://louvre.fr).



Detail of fig. 45.<sup>169</sup>

Archaic vase painting also featured the Gorgoneion alone. The external decoration of an Archaic kylix, or drinking cup, shows just the head of a Gorgon whose mouth opens as her tongue hangs out, her snaky locks reaching out in all directions (fig. 46). Athena's snaky aegis is another example of the apotropaic function of the Gorgoneion. Both sculpture and vase painting show Athena wearing her aegis, which has Medusa's face at its center. Athena wore her aegis when in battle and the abundance of this depiction is due to the popular topic of battle scenes in visual culture. Two examples here are representative of a vast corpus of Athenian art showing their protectress wearing the aegis. A belly amphora (Fig. 47) shows Athena in her helmet and carrying her shield. On her right shoulder is a large Gorgoneion surrounded by snakes. A freestanding sculpture in the Acropolis Museum also shows Athena's aegis (Fig. 48). Although somewhat weathered and thus harder to make out, the Gorgon's head is in the center and is carved with its common features. The gorgon on Athena's aegis would have protected

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<sup>169</sup> Photo: Public Domain.

the goddess from evil during wars and turned her foes to helpless stone, even as the snakes hissing around the edges of her aegis showed her link to Athens itself.



**Fig. 46. Kylix with Gorgoneion and apotropaic eyes, 530-520 BCE.<sup>170</sup>**



**Detail of fig. 46.**

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<sup>170</sup> *CVA*. Germany Munich 13, pl. 70.6 and 70.7 (detail).





Fig. 47. Belly amphora attributed to the Andokides Painter, c. 525-500 BCE.<sup>171</sup>



Fig. 48. Torso of Athena, found southwest of the Acropolis, c. 550-500 BCE.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>171</sup> *LIMC*, Athena 121.

<sup>172</sup> Dickins, fig. 142.

In literature, the Gorgoneion's role as protector against evil is found mostly in association with Pallas Athena, or Athena the protector. One example comes from Euripides' *Electra* (420 BCE): "Go to Athens and embrace the holy image of Pallas; for she will prevent them, flickering with dreadful serpents, from touching you, as she stretches over your head her Gorgon-faced shield."<sup>173</sup> If we directly contrast this representation of the Gorgoneion's *good* nature with the following quote from Euripides' *Ion* (414 BCE), its liminality becomes clearer:

O Cephisus, her ancestor, with a bull's face, what a viper have you bred, or serpent that glares a deadly flame! She has dared all, she is no less than the Gorgon's blood, with which she was about to kill me. Seize her, so that the uplands of Parnassus, from which she will be hurled to make her stony leaps, may comb out those smooth tresses of her hair.<sup>174</sup>

The dualistic symbolism in the Classical literary portrayal of the Gorgon and the Gorgoneion suggests that Athenians understood their liminality. In *Electra*, the gorgonian serpent acts to repel evil, but in *Ion* the serpent *is* the evil. Regardless of her close relationship with Athena, the snake-haired Gorgon was "loathed of mankind," a monster, "whom no one of mortal kind shall look upon and still draw breath."<sup>175</sup> But for the Athenians, over whom Athena stretched that very Gorgon's head in protection, the Gorgoneion and its snakes provided a powerful apotropaic force.

### 3 | *Maenads*

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<sup>173</sup> Euripides, *Electra*, lines 1254-1256. Trans. E.P. Coleridge.

<sup>174</sup> Euripides, *Ion*, lines 1263-1269. Trans. Robert Potter.

<sup>175</sup> Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (430 BCE), lines 799-800. Trans. Herbert Weir Smyth.

Maenads were the female followers of Dionysus who are pictured throughout Attic vase painting as either handling or wearing snakes.<sup>176</sup> These snakes were understood as inherently vicious animals, but they had the capacity for calmness if tamed by a Maenad.



Fig. 49. Cup by the Chelid Painter, c. 515-500 BCE.<sup>177</sup>

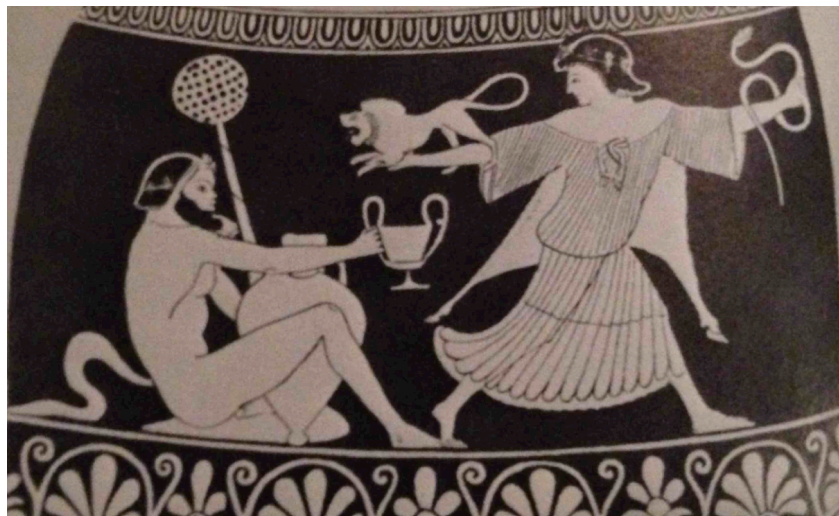


Fig. 50. Oinochoe by the Dutuit Painter, c. 500-475.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>176</sup> According to the Chorus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, the Maenads wore snakes on their heads in imitation of "the bull-horned god" who was crowned with "crowns of snakes" (lines 100-103). Trans. T.A. Buckley.

<sup>177</sup> *ARFVAP*, fig. 111.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid*, fig. 207.

Pottery depicts the Maenad both using her snake to her advantage when angry (fig. 49) and holding her snake away from others, as if to calm its angry behavior (fig. 50). This happens frequently in the Satyr-Maenad duo, a common theme in vase painting throughout the Archaic period. In these scenes, the serpent sets the tone. As a mechanism of expressing both anger and appeasement, the snake communicates the context of the relationship depicted. Holding her snake in the face of a Satyr, the Maenad may be understood as expressing discontent (fig. 51). The Maenad may even use her snake's vexation as a method of protecting herself from the hyper-sexuality of the Satyr.



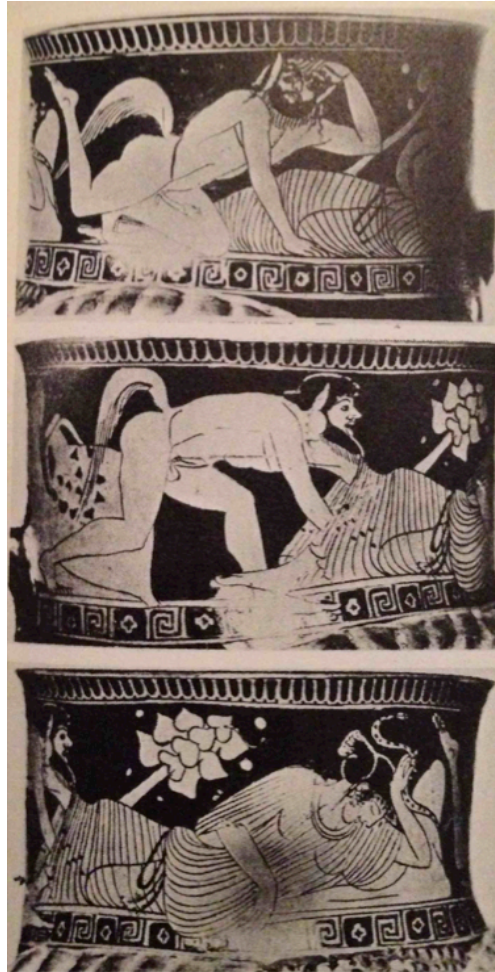
**Fig. 51. Satyr and Maenad. Cup attributed to Makron, c. 500-450 BCE.**<sup>179</sup>

A rhyton by the Brygos painter shows the opposite use of the snake. The Maenad lies down and holds her snake away from the satyrs crawling over to her (fig. 52). Some pottery also shows the Maenad on her own, with a snake wrapped around her head. In this scenario the Maenad tames the snake; she does not hold the snake out towards her opponent in an attempt to evoke its anger (fig. 53a). A different scene on the same vase shows the Maenad aggressively pushing a snake into a Satyr's face (fig. 53b). The dual

<sup>179</sup> *CVA*. Germany 88, Munich 16, pl. 47.1.



use of the serpent on this vase exemplifies the liminal force of the serpent as a mode of projecting both evil and angry forces as well as protective and kind — even inviting — forces.



**Fig. 52. Rhyton (neck) by the Brygos Painter c. 480-470.<sup>180</sup>**

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<sup>180</sup> *ARFVAP*, fig. 257.



**Fig. 53a. Tondo of a kylix attributed to the Brygos Painter, 485-480.<sup>181</sup>**



**Fig. 53b. External painting of a kylix attributed to the Brygos Painter, 485-480.<sup>182</sup>**

As followers of Dionysus the Maenads were often exposed to sexual situations, especially considering their frequent encounters with Satyrs, who also followed Dionysus. The snake thus acts as the Maenad's tool. Both her tame companion and her fierce protector, the Maenad's use of the snake is almost similar to that of the Gorgoneion in that it could be used to strike fear into predators.

<sup>181</sup> *CVA*. Germany 88, Munich 16, pl. 19.4.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, pl. 21.6.



**Fig. 54. Laocoön. Roman copy of a Greek original, c. 40-30 BCE.<sup>183</sup>**

The mythological story of Laocoön demonstrates how the snake encompasses both good and evil. Laocoön was a Trojan priest of Apollo who committed a grave crime against certain gods during the Trojan War as he took the side of the Trojans. As the Greeks prepared the infamous Trojan Horse, Laocoön warned his fellow Trojans of the trick—a major crime against Apollo. As a result, Apollo punished him and his sons by sending sea snakes to crush them to death. Although it only exists in copies, a sculpture of Laocoön, originally crafted by Rhodian sculptors, shows him and his sons under siege (fig. 54).<sup>184</sup> The snakes in the sculpture of Laocoön represent seizure and punishment, and they demonstrate the ability of the gods to protect not just the Athenian people but the Greeks altogether. In this respect, the serpents that attacked Laocoön serve

<sup>183</sup> Photo: Public Domain.

<sup>184</sup> Roman and Roman 292.



both as Laocoön's evil enemies and as efficient protectors of the Athenian good. In some versions of this myth, Athena and Poseidon, two gods special to Athens, were said to have sent these snakes against the oriental priest.<sup>185</sup> This exemplifies the protection Athenians received under their gods and the ferocity those gods evoke in order to maintain this protection.

Thus another liminal feature of the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic serpent is its admixture of good and evil. In the case of Zeus Meilichios, his ability to shift into a serpent allotted him the liminality between malevolent and benevolent and characterized him as a god who must be appeased. In the cases of Gorgons, Gorgoneia, Maenads, and Laocoön; the serpent holds the admixture of two identities: a good, the protector, and a source of evil. In the cases of the Gorgons, the Gorgoneia and Laocoön, the protection is for the Athenian people, but in the case of the Maenads, protection is a mechanism employed by and for themselves.

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<sup>185</sup> Stewart, Anne. "Hellenistic Problems." 2014.

In conclusion, the establishment of the serpent as a liminal figure enables the animal's uncanny nature and its fantastic nature. Thinking of the serpent in this manner enables us to understand its ubiquitous presence in Greek material culture from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods *outside* the confines of its categorical associations. Generally understood previously in terms of domestic and funerary associations, the serpent is far too complex to remain confined within those categories. Entwined with tension that often finds ambiguous positioning in equivocal narratives, the serpent must exist independent of known and constructed classifications.

The representation of snakes undergoes minor developments from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods.<sup>186</sup> Aside from stylistic changes, Satyrs and Maenads remain the same, Zeus Meilichios' votives do not change, and Giants remain the same until the Hellenistic period, when serpent tails replace their human legs. A bit more change comes in the case of Athena's aegis. The snakes that border the aegis fluctuate between large and small and in both the Archaic and Classical periods these snakes face differing directions—at times they face each other, otherwise they point outward from Athena's body. In examples of Archaic and Classical vase painting, Athena's aegis is more detailed and often displays a snakeskin texture.

Snakes featured on vases depicting Gorgons are also more detailed than their sculpted counterparts. Vase painting shows the Gorgon in her most monstrous form, tongue out, fangs, and sometimes bearded with snakes crawling out from her hair. The architectural sculpture also shows the gorgon with fangs, tongue out, and crinkled nose,

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<sup>186</sup> These changes refer to those in the body of images surveyed for this thesis. See Appendix A for a chart outlining these developments and examples of each.

but the serpentine attributes are less prominent and they often figure in behind the Gorgon's head or around her waist like a belt. The same goes for the Gorgoneion, which is circumvented by snakes in Archaic vase painting. This differs slightly from the Gorgoneion on Athena's aegis, which generally features less snakes and becomes increasingly subdued during the Classical period (although there are a few exceptions).

However, one mythological figure shows a pronounced difference in his relationship to the serpent during the Archaic period. Archaic vases showing Herakles engaging in battle depict the snake as a tool. In the vases that show Herakles and Athena, Herakles is actively engaged in battle, wearing his lion skin mantle and shooting his arrows at the enemy. In fact, Athena even accompanies Herakles in some Archaic depictions of his twelve labors. In all of these instances, however, Athena is passive. She oversees Herakles from behind, dressed in her armor, but not participating in the battle. Athena's snaky aegis is specifically pronounced in these scenes. Considering the autochthonous connections between Athens, Athena, and her aegis (as discussed in Section I), the prominent aegis in these scenes suggests that Athena acts as the tool by which Herakles will defeat his enemies. Due to Peisistratos' desire to draw bloodlines between himself and the hero, these depictions of Herakles with Athena may work to illustrate Herakles' autochthony.<sup>187</sup> Drawing on this autochthony, these vases suggest that Herakles' power is driven by the power of Athens. The autochthonous serpent thus accompanies Herakles in the form of Athens' patron deity, Athena. Finally, these scenes

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<sup>187</sup> This idea is reflected in John Boardman's article "Herakles, Peisistratos and Eleusis," in which he claims that variations in Herakles' iconography and the "popularity of Herakles in Athenian art of the Peisistratan period was due to some degree of deliberate identification between tyrant and hero, both appearing as special protégés of the goddess Athena" (pg. 1). Boardman's articles "Herakles, Peisistratos and the Unconvinced" and "Herakles, Peisistratos and Sons" also argue for this connection.

are less prominent during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, which tend to focus more on Herakles' twelve labors.

Thus the chronological development of the serpent displays its continued occupancy of a junction between realms. It violates automatic association with one zone and instead adopts capabilities, characteristics, and forms from various realms. These abilities and characteristics travel with the serpent, bringing tension and anxiety to whatever or whomever it accompanies. The snake both embodies a fluid form and enables fluidity in its associated forms. As we have seen, when positioned as an attribute, the serpent's palimpsest of associations brings the subject's affiliations into question as the subject begins to float in a reality characterized by unknowingness and uncertainty. This marks the very collision of two modes of reality: a central reality collides with a peripheral reality and develops, in the entirety of its representation, an otherworldliness known as the *fantastic*: "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event."<sup>188</sup>

Todorov's fantastic is a moment of hesitation: an instance of uncertainty that exists between two modes of reality—real and imaginary.<sup>189</sup> This hesitation both stems from and further stipulates confusion and ambiguity. The uncomfortable and unfamiliar penetrates the comfortable and familiar: "In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know [...], there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world."<sup>190</sup> During instances of physical and mental transition a supernatural reality calls the ordinary world into question. The supernatural reality is governed by laws that we cannot understand and therefore the elements of our world that we *do* (or at

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<sup>188</sup> Todorov 25.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

least up until this point we do) understand become less clear, less obvious, less definite. In the case of mythological shape-shifters, the serpent plays an important role as the form of choice for species of dual form and species with the ability to change forms. In both cases, the serpent acts as the supernal addition to the subject—the fantastic is manifest in the tension between these two forms. The serpent challenges the ideas and the components of reality.

In Section I we assessed Athenian autochthony. In this section we addressed the serpent as a signifier of beings that exist at the interstice between a connection to the earth and the earth itself.

This discussion led us into Section II, which explored the Classical doctrine of ‘man as the measure of all things’. Chapter 1 discussed the Athenian hero and his close relation with the snake. We examined the serpent’s crucial role in the hero’s apotheosis, specifically in the hero’s assumption of the animal’s transformational power as a means of achieving the transformation from mortal to god. Chapter 2 moved into the cycle of life and death and explored the serpent as an icon of both zones, specifically at that dubious moment when the afterlife invades the living realm and vice versa. In Chapter 3, we saw that the serpent plays a liminal role in the admixture of Chthonian and Olympian qualities. The serpent enables Olympic gods and goddesses to relinquish the bounds of Mt. Olympus and flow between their current zone and its opposing realm. This causes Olympic deities to confront chthonic associations, which further confuses preconceived notions of their identities.

Finally, in Section III we examined anxiety. Chapters 4 and 5 surveyed how the snake factors into embodied and disembodied interstices. Chapter 4 focused entirely on

the physical sphere. Here we surveyed numerous individuals who embody liminality in one of two ways: in their ability to traverse forms or in their existence as a compilation of multiple forms. Chapter 5 focused specifically on a disembodied form of liminality: the serpent's personality. This chapter exhibited the serpent's existence at the collision of good and evil.

The combination of all this information unveils the utter complexity of the serpent. Gods, goddesses, heroes, and others associated with the serpent overlap the bounds of this thesis for the same reason that propelled my interest in this topic. A pervasive symbol in all ancient Athenian material culture available to us, the serpent does not *fit* anywhere. It is the outlier, the rebel that shatters society's conventional systems of organization. In its uncanny shape and behavior, its liminal positioning, and the tension it bears, this rebellious reptile is the manifestation of the *fantastic*, and we will never be able to *secure* it.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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47. Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2159.
48. Acr. 142.
49. Munich, Antikensammlungen 2589.
50. BM E 510.
51. Munich, Antikensammlungen 2644.
52. Warsaw, National Museum.
53. Munich, Antikensammlungen 2645.
54. Rome, Vatican 1059.

APPENDIX A: THE CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SERPENTS IN POPULAR SCENES OF  
VASE PAINTING AND SCULPTURE, 600-27 BCE

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**Athena's aegis**

Archaic 600-480 BCE	Archaic & Classical	Classical 480-323 BCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patterned aegis, large snakes extending off perimeter, with Herakles<sup>191</sup></li> <li>Gorgoneion (takes up almost entirety of aegis), larger and less numerous snakes on perimeter<sup>192</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Snakes on perimeter, no Gorgoneion, no texture on body of aegis<sup>193</sup></li> <li>Snakes on perimeter, no Gorgoneion, pattern on body of aegis<sup>194</sup></li> <li>Snakes on perimeter, Gorgoneion, patterned<sup>195</sup></li> <li>Blank aegis, small snakes on perimeter<sup>196</sup></li> <li>Just Gorgoneion<sup>197</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patterned aegis, no Gorgoneion, two full-bodied snakes tied around neck<sup>198</sup></li> <li>No snakes on perimeter, Gorgoneion, patterned aegis<sup>199</sup></li> <li>Patterned aegis, no snakes on perimeter, no Gorgoneion<sup>200</sup></li> <li>Snakes on perimeter, patterned, Gorgoneion, with Herakles<sup>201</sup></li> <li>No snakes, no Gorgoneion, checkerboard pattern (Apulia only)<sup>202</sup></li> </ul>

**Gorgoneia**<sup>203</sup>

Archaic 600-480 BCE	Archaic and Classical	Classical 480-323 BCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With Perseus, tongue out, no snakes (V)<sup>204</sup></li> <li>Without snakes (V)<sup>205</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On Athena's aegis (V/S)<sup>207</sup></li> <li>Snakes border entire</li> </ul>	N/A

<sup>191</sup> Munich 1575, 2080.

<sup>192</sup> Berlin F 2159.

<sup>193</sup> Acr. 594, 631A; Basel BS499; BM E 268; Castle Ashby 21.

<sup>194</sup> Basel BS 456; Berlin 2291, 2537, F 2634; BM B 130, B 131, B 132, B 134, B 137, B 143, B 145, B 612, E 178, E 299, E 305; Boston 97.368; Castle Ashby 18, 20, 46; Copenhagen 126; Gottingen K 201; Jena V188; Munich 1453, 1455, 2322, 2650; Oxford 277; Stockholm 1963.1.

<sup>195</sup> BM E 165, E 469; Karlsruhe 259; Louvre G 104; Palermo E 469; Vatican 16545; Vienna 3694.

<sup>196</sup> BM E 304, Vienna 3711.

<sup>197</sup> Acr. 142, Leningrad St 1858.

<sup>198</sup> Louvre 3391 (25\*4).

<sup>199</sup> BM F 74, MET 34.11.17.

<sup>200</sup> Ruvo 1093.

<sup>201</sup> ARV 1107, 4; Madrid 11265.

<sup>202</sup> Adolphseck 78.

<sup>203</sup> Due to the significant difference in depiction of Gorgoneia/Gorgons on vases versus those in sculpted form, Gorgoneia/Gorgons on vases have been denoted using the sign (V) and Gorgoneia/Gorgons in sculpture have been denoted using the sign (S). If one category appears in both vase painting and sculpture, it has been designated so by the sign (V/S).

<sup>204</sup> Munich 8725.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tongue out, crinkled nose, snakes crown head, bearded, fangs (V)<sup>206</sup></li> </ul>	head (V) <sup>208</sup>	
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### Gorgons

Archaic 600-480 BCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wings, fangs, snake crown, tongue out (V)<sup>209</sup></li> <li>Wings, snake belt (S)<sup>210</sup></li> <li>No wings, snake hair, snakes behind head, snake belt, snakes behind mid-body (S)<sup>211</sup></li> </ul>

### Herakles

Archaic 600-480 BCE	Archaic and Classical	Classical 480-323 BCE	Classical and Hellenistic	Hellenistic c 323-27 BCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vs. Hydra, with Athena<sup>212</sup></li> <li>Vs. Nemean Lion, with Athena<sup>213</sup></li> <li>Other active scenes with passive Athena<sup>214</sup></li> <li>Wearing lion skin, wrestling Apollo<sup>215</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Infant strangling snakes<sup>216</sup></li> <li>Vs. Hydra<sup>217</sup></li> <li>With Athena<sup>218</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gigantomachy<sup>219</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Naked, vs. Hydra<sup>220</sup></li> </ul>	N/A

<sup>205</sup> Munich 1453.

<sup>207</sup> Acr. 142; *ARV* 1107, 4; Berlin F 2159; BM E 165, E 469, F 74; Karlsruhe 259; Leningrad St 1858; Louvre G 104; Madrid 11265; MET 34.11.17; Palermo E 469; Vatican 16545; Vienna 3694.

<sup>206</sup> Munich 2027.

<sup>208</sup> Basel BS 456, Munich 8935, Vienna 3710.

<sup>209</sup> Louvre E 874, Munich 2313.

<sup>210</sup> Acr. 701.

<sup>211</sup> West pediment of the Temple of Artemis at Corfu.

<sup>212</sup> NM 416.

<sup>213</sup> BM B 193, Gottingen K 201.

<sup>214</sup> Amiens 3057.225.47a; Boston 28.46; Leningrad; Munich 1575, 1721; Naples 2514; Reggio 4001; Vatican 372.

<sup>215</sup> Munich 2080.

<sup>216</sup> Louvre G 192, MET 25.28.

## Maenads

Archaic 600-480 BCE	Archaic and Classical	Classical 480-323 BCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maenad and satyrs, Maenad holds snake towards herself<sup>221</sup></li> <li>• Maenad holds the snake while dancing<sup>222</sup></li> <li>• Maenad holds snakes away from satyrs, playful<sup>223</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maenad points the snake at the satyr with hostility<sup>224</sup></li> <li>• Maenad dances with snake-crown<sup>225</sup></li> <li>• Maenad holds snake in scene with satyrs and Dionysos<sup>226</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maenad with snake and satyr lovingly<sup>227</sup></li> </ul>

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<sup>217</sup> Acr. 1, Malibu 77.AE.11, Palermo V 763.

<sup>218</sup> *ARV* 1107, 4; Madrid 11265; Munich 1575, 2080.

<sup>219</sup> Basel, Ludwig 51.

<sup>220</sup> NM 3617, 2<sup>nd</sup> metope on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.

<sup>221</sup> Castle Ashby 41.

<sup>222</sup> BM E 253, Hermitage B.1532.

<sup>223</sup> Warsaw, National Museum.

<sup>224</sup> Munich 2589, 2644, 2645.

<sup>225</sup> Ferrara 2897, Munich 2645.

<sup>226</sup> MET 31.11.11.

<sup>227</sup> Taranto *ARV* 860.

Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* (ed. Herbert Weir Smyth)

525-533:

**“Χορός**

οἶδ', ὃ τέκνον, παρῇ γάρ: ἔκ τ' ὄνειράτων  
καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων πεπαλμένη  
χοὰς ἔπεμψε τάσδε δύσθεος γυνή.

**Ὀρέστης**

ἦ καὶ πέπυσθε τοῦναρ, ὥστ' ὀρθῶς φράσαι;

**Χορός**

τεκεῖν δράκοντ' ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.

**Ὀρέστης**

καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾷ καὶ καρανοῦται λόγος;

**Χορός**

ἐν ἱ παιδὸς ὀρμίσαι δίκην.

**Ὀρέστης**

τίνος βορᾶς χρήζοντα, νεογενὲς δάκος;

**Χορός**

αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαζὸν ἐν τῶνείρατι.”

547-549:

“ἦ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῷδ' ἐπώμωξεν πάθει,  
δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἑκπαγλὸν τέρας,  
θανεῖν βιαίως: ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγὼ”

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* (ed. Herbert Weir Smyth)

799-800:

“δρακοντόμαλλοι Γοργόνες βροτοστυγεῖς,  
ἄς θνητὸς οὐδεὶς εἰσιδὼν ἔξει πνοάς.”

Aristophanes, *Wasps*, (ed. F.W. Hall and W.M. Geldart)

439-441:

**“Φιλοκλέων**

ὦ Κέκροψ ἥρωες ἄναξ τὰ πρὸς ποδῶν Δρακοντίδη,  
περιορᾷς οὔτω μ’ ὑπ’ ἀνδρῶν βαρβάρων χειρούμενον,  
οὓς ἐγὼ 'δίδαξα κλάειν τέτταρ' ἐς τὴν χοίνικα;”

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (ed. W.D. Ross)

2.23.29:

“καὶ Δράκοντα τὸν νομοθέτην, ὅτι οὐκ ἂν ἀνθρώπου οἶδ’ ὅτι οὐκ ἂν ἀνθρώπου οἱ νόμοι ἀλλὰ δράκοντος (χαλεποῖγάρ):”

Bacchylides, *Epinicians, Ode 9, (The Poems and Fragments)*

13-14:

“πέφν’ ἀωτεύοντα δράκων ὑπέροπλος,  
σᾶμα μέλλοντος φόνου.”

Demosthenes, *Funeral Speech* (ed. W. Rennie)

Section 30:

“οὐκ ἐλάνθανεν Οἰνείδας ὅτι Κάδμου μὲν Σεμέλη, τῆς δ’ ὅ  
ν οὐ πρόπον ἐστὶν ὀνομάζειν ἐπὶ τοῦδε τοῦτάφου, τοῦ δ’ Οἰ  
νεὺς γέγονεν, ὃς ἀρχηγὸς αὐτῶν ἐκαλεῖτο. κοινοῦ δ’ ὄντος  
ἀμφοτέραις ταῖς πόλεσιν τοῦπαρόντος κινδύνου, ὑπὲρ ἀμ  
φοτέρων ἅπασαν ὄροντο δεῖν ἀγωνίαν ἐκτεῖναι. ἤδεσαν Κεκρ  
οπίδαι τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἀρχηγὸν τὰ μὲν ὥς ἔστιν δράκων, τὰ δ’ ὥ  
ς ἔστιν ἄνθρωπος λεγόμενον, οὐκ ἄλλοθὲν ποθεν ἢ τῷ τήν  
σ ὕνεσιν αὐτοῦ προσομοιοῦν ἄνθρωπον, τὴν ἀλκὴν δὲ δράκον  
τι. ἄξια δὲ τούτων πράττειν ὑπελάμβανον αὐτοῖς προσήκειν  
.”

Euripides, *Bacchae* (ed. Gilbert Murray)

1330-1338:

**“Διονυσος**

δράκων γενήσῃ μεταβαλὼν, δάμαρ τε σὴ  
ἐκθηριωθεῖς ὄφεος ἀλλάξει τύπον,  
ἦν Ἄρεος ἔσχευ Ἀρμονίαν θνητὸς γεγώς.  
ὄχον δὲ μόσχων, χρησμὸς ὥς λέγει Διὸς,  
ἐλᾷς μετ’ ἀλόχου, βαρβάρων ἡγούμενος.  
πολλὰς δὲ πέρσεις ἀναρίθμῳ στρατεύματι  
πόλεις: ὅταν δὲ Λοξίου χρηστήριον

διαρπάσωσι, νόστον ἄθλιον πάλιν  
σχήσουσι: σὲ δ' Ἄρης Ἀρμονίαν τε ρύσεται  
μακάρων τ' ἐς αἶαν σὸν καθιδρύσει βίον."

Euripides, *Electra* (ed. Gilbert Murray)

1254-1256:

“πρόσπτυξον: εἴρξει γάρ νιν ἐπτοημένας  
δεινοῖς δράκουσιν ὥστε μὴ ψαύειν σέθεν,  
γοργῶφ' ὑπερτείνουσα σῶ κάρα κύκλον.”

Euripides, *Heracles* (ed. Gilbert Murray)

394-401:

**“Χορός**  
ὕμνωδούς τε κόρας  
395 ἦλυθεν ἐσπέριον ἐς αὐλάν,  
χρυσέων πετάλων ἄπο μηλοφόρον χερὶ καρπὸν ἀμέρ-  
ξων, δράκοντα πυρσόνωτον,  
ὅς σφ' ἄπλατον ἀμφελικτὸς  
ἔλικ' ἐφρούρει, κτανών:  
400 ποντίας θ' ἁλὸς μυχοῦς  
εἰσέβαινε, θνατοῖς  
γαλανείας τιθεὶς ἐρετμοῖς.”

Euripides, *Ion* (ed. Gilbert Murray)

1015:

**“Κρέουσα**  
κτείνει, δρακόντων ἰδὲ ὦν τῶν Γοργόνος.”

1263-1269:

**“Ἴων**  
ὃ ταυρόμορφον ὄμμα Κηφισοῦ πατρός,  
οἷαν ἐχιδναν τήνδ' ἔφυσας ἢ πυρὸς  
δράκοντ' ἀναβλέποντα φοινίαν φλόγα,  
ἢ τόλμα πᾶσ' ἔνεστιν, οὐδ' ἥσσω ἐφυ  
1265 Γοργοῦς σταλαγμῶν, οἷς ἔμελλέ με κτενεῖν.  
λάζυσθ', ἴν' αὐτῆς τοὺς ἀκηράτους πλόκους  
κόμης καταξήνωσι Παρνασοῦ πλάκες,  
ὅθεν πετραῖον ἄλμα δισκηθήσεται.”



Euripides, *Phoenissae* (ed. Gilbert Murray)

655-680:

“Βάκχιον χόρευμα παρθένοισι  
Θηβαΐταισι καὶ γυναιξὶν εὐίοις.  
ἔνθα φόνιος ἦν δράκων  
Ἄρεος ὠμόφρων φύλαξ  
νάματ’ ἐνυδρα καὶ ῥέεθρα  
χλοερὰ δεργμάτων κόραισι  
πολυπλάνοις ἐπισκοπῶν:  
ὄν ἐπὶ χέρνιβας μολῶν  
Κάδμος ὄλεσε μαρμάρῳ:  
κρᾶτα φόνιον ὀλεσίθηρος  
ὠλένας δικῶν βολαῖς,  
δίας ἀμάτορος δ’  
ἐς βαθυσπόρους γύας  
γαπετεῖς δικῶν ὀδόν-  
τας Παλλάδος φραδαῖσιν:  
ἔνθεν ἐξανῆκε γὰρ  
πάνοπλον ὄψιν ὑπὲρ ἄκρων  
ὄρων χθονός: σιδαρόφρων  
δέ νιν φόνος πάλιν ξυνῆψε γὰρ φίλα.  
αἵματος δ’ ἔδευσε γαῖαν, ἃ νιν εὐηλίοισι  
δεῖξεν αἰθέρος πνοαῖς.  
καὶ σέ, τὸν προμάτορος  
Ἰοῦς ποτ’ ἔκγονον  
Ἑπαφον, ὃ Διὸς γένεθλον,  
ἐκάλεσ’ ἐκάλεσα βαρβάρῳ βοᾷ,  
ιώ, βαρβάροις λιταῖς.”

Plato, *Laws* (ed. John Burnet)

1.641c:

“δὲ τοιοῦτοι τά τε ἄλλα πράττειεν καλῶς, ἔτι δὲ κἂν νικῶεν  
τοὺς πολεμίους μαχόμενοι. παιδεία μὲν οὖν φέρει καὶ νίκην  
, νίκη δ’ ἐνίοτε ἀπαιδευσίαν: πολλοὶ γὰρ ὑβριστότεροι διὰ π  
ολέμων νίκας γενόμενοι μυρίων ἄλλων κακῶν δι’ ὕβριν ἐνε  
πλήσθησαν, καὶ παιδεία μὲν οὐδεπώποτε γέγονεν Καδμεία,  
νῖκαι δὲ ἀνθρώποις πολλαὶ δὴ τοιαῦται γεγόνασιν τε καὶ ἔσ  
ονται.”

Sophocles, *Trachiniae* (ed. Francis Storr)

9-16:

“μνηστήρ γάρ ἦν μοι ποταμός, Ἀχελῷον λέγω,  
10ῶς μ’ ἐν τρισὶν μορφαῖσιν ἐξήτει πατρός,  
φοιτῶν ἐναργῆς ταῦρος, ἄλλοτ’ αἰόλος  
δράκων ἐλικτός, ἄλλοτ’ ἀνδρείῳ κύτει  
βούπρωρος· ἐκ δὲ δασκίου γενειάδος  
κρουνοὶ διερραίνοντο κρηναίου ποτοῦ.  
15τοιόνδ’ ἐγὼ μνηστήρα προσδεδεγμένη  
δύστηνος αἰεὶ κατθανεῖν ἐπηυχόμην,  
πρὶν τῆσδε κοίτης ἐμπελασθῆναί ποτε.”  
“μνηστήρ γάρ ἦν μοι ποταμός, Ἀχελῷον λέγω,  
10ῶς μ’ ἐν τρισὶν μορφαῖσιν ἐξήτει πατρός,  
φοιτῶν ἐναργῆς ταῦρος, ἄλλοτ’ αἰόλος  
δράκων ἐλικτός, ἄλλοτ’ ἀνδρείῳ κύτει  
βούπρωρος· ἐκ δὲ δασκίου γενειάδος  
κρουνοὶ διερραίνοντο κρηναίου ποτοῦ.  
15τοιόνδ’ ἐγὼ μνηστήρα προσδεδεγμένη  
δύστηνος αἰεὶ κατθανεῖν ἐπηυχόμην,  
πρὶν τῆσδε κοίτης ἐμπελασθῆναί ποτε.”

834-838:

**“Χορός**

εἰ γάρ σφε Κενταύρου φονία νεφέλα  
χρίει δολοποιὸς ἀνάγκα  
πλευρά, προστακέντος ἰοῦ,  
ὃν τέκετο θάνατος, ἔτρεφε δ’ αἰόλος δράκων,  
πῶς ὅδ’ ἂν ἀέλιον ἕτερον ἢ τανῦν ἴδοι,  
δεινοτάτῳ μὲν ὕδρας προστετακὼς  
φάσματι· μελαγχαίτα δ’ ἄμμιγὰ νιν αἰκίζει  
Νέσσου ὑποφόνια δολιόμυθα κέντρ’ ἐπιζέσαντα.”

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<sup>228</sup> Entries in bold typeface include those cited in this paper. Entries in regular typeface include consulted research.

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